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OR
SUNSHINE AND SHADOW.

BY
M. OZELLA SHIELDS.

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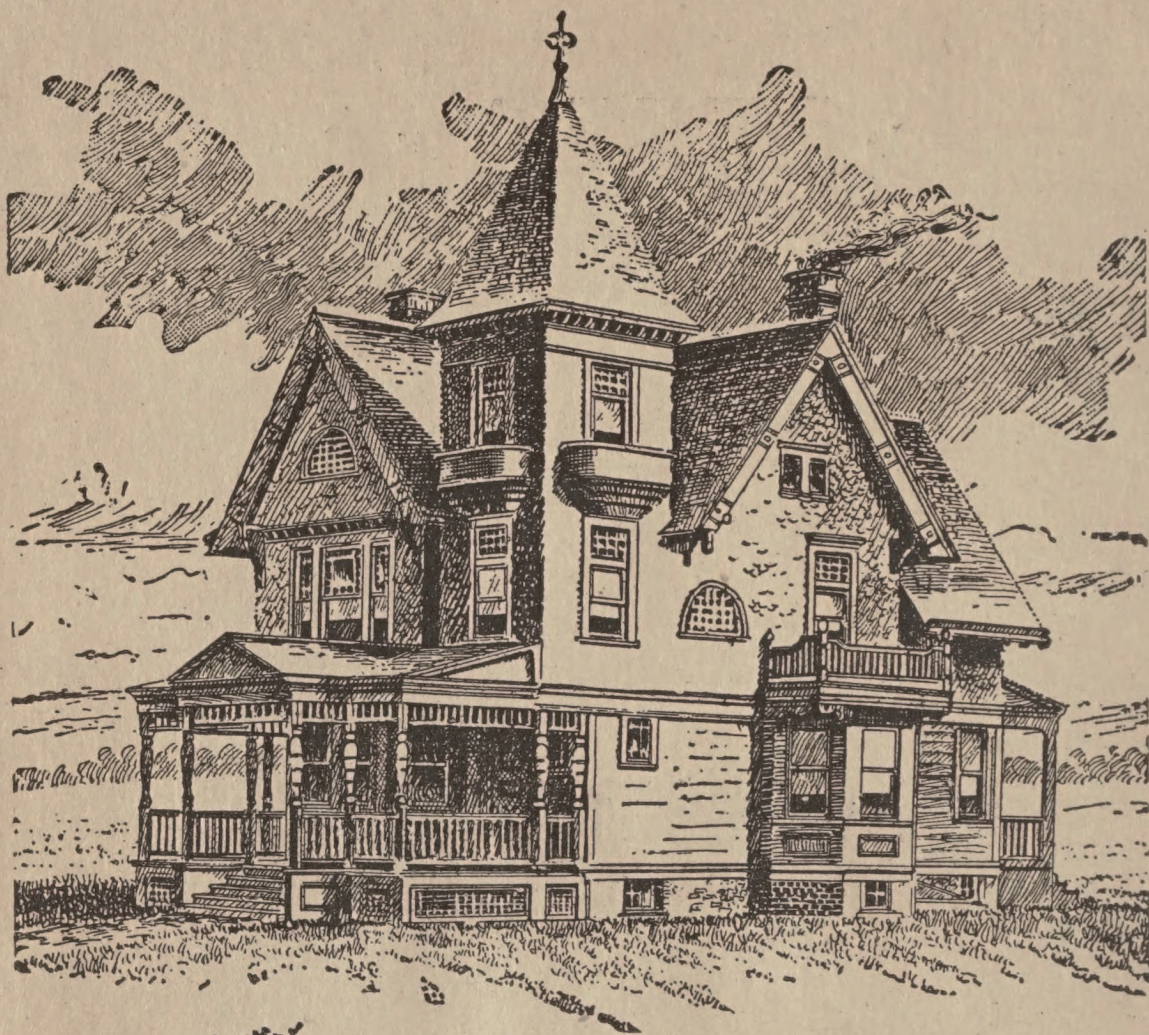


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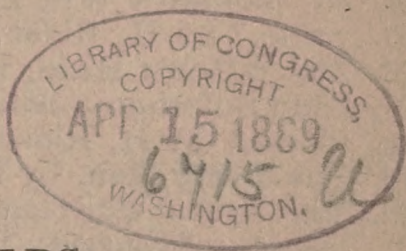
IZMA;

Or, SUNSHINE AND SHADOW.

A Novel.

BY

M. OZELLA SHIELDS.



40
“O life! life! life! with laughter and with tears
I tried myself: I knew that I had need
Of pain to prove that this was life indeed,
With its warm privilege of hopes and fears.”

—OWEN MEREDITH.

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IZMA;

OR, SUNSHINE AND SHADOW.

CHAPTER I.

LADY ADELENE.

It was one of June's own days. The morning sun, showering its brightness upon everything, causing fountains to glitter beneath its radiant touch and flowers to droop meekly, crept stealthily through the giant elms surrounding Merivale, and, reaching its lofty, ivy-covered walls, grew bolder and daringly flung itself over wide balconies and unprotected wings, covering the tall marble pillars,—whose whiteness in the warm light was dazzling,—and falling upon the whole beautiful scene with seeming presumption and pride.

It was just such a golden, gleeful sunlight as had shone upon the grand old mansion twenty years before, when the most cruel blight that ever darkened a household fell upon Merivale.

Then, too, the clear blue skies seemed to mock at misery, and the birds in the hawthorn branches had carolled their gladsome songs; yet that cloudless morn-

ing was the darkest hour the Earl of Southwo'ld had ever in all his life known. Though the world outside was full of joy and beauty, a gloom as solemn as death had settled over those spacious halls, where, like a grim spectre, the first shadow of a disgrace had crept.

A cry of horror, mingled with anger and despair, fell from the old Earl's lips when the truth was first made known to him.

It was long before he could believe that his only daughter—beautiful Adelene Dancourt, the pride and joy of his heart—was missing from Merivale ; that she had fled the night previous, while the household slept blissfully unconscious of all harm, with a forbidden lover, a handsome Spanish merchant—a tradesman!—a disgrace which had never before been known to a Dancourt, and one which was never in life forgiven by the Earl.

The shock was so great that for a time it almost bereft him of his senses ; but when he had recovered sufficiently to understand that it was no delusion, no mistake,—that Lady Adelene had indeed deceived him,—he cursed the name of the child which he had hitherto blessed, and summoning his son Robert, who was then at Merivale, and married according to his wishes, he bade him go to the picture-gallery, and, after taking a last look upon the sweet, smiling face of his half-sister,—which the irate nobleman now declared was full of deceit and treachery,—turn the portrait to the wall.

This the son declined to obey, beseeching his father to wait until Adelene had had time to clear her good name before he condemned her ; for though the girl was

the child of the Earl's second wife, Robert's mother had died while he was quite young, and he had never realized the difference in Lady Adelene and an own sister.

But Lord Southwolde was obdurate. His son's refusal to obey his request only increased his ire ; and going himself to the picture-gallery, he tore his daughter's portrait from its hangings, and flung it from him like some polluted thing, to lie there in the corner and mould in the dust.

And no one dared afterwards to touch it. Not one in that household, who had loved the girl for her beauty, and grace, and gentleness, was allowed to breathe her name where the relentless Earl of Southwolde might hear it.

It was not long after the flight ere a letter came to Merivale from Spain, penned by Lady Adelene's own fair hand, which would have told of a heart full of love for the man whom she had lawfully wedded, yet one which was aching for a word of forgiveness from the father she had wronged ; but although Robert Dan-court urged the Earl to learn the contents, he refused to even break the seal, and the letter which had been sent with such a hopeful heart was returned as it had come.

Two years passed, and then another letter came to Merivale,—perhaps more full of pleading than the first,—beseeching the Earl to hear her story and forgive her for the sake of her child, lately born ; but still the stern father would not even look upon the touching appeal from his erring daughter. Like the former, it was returned unopened, but this time it was accompanied by a cruel message—one that the Earl, made heartless by

his own misery, did not dream was to cost the young and sensitive mother her life.

“Your letters to me, Adelene Dancourt, are futile,” he wrote. “They will all share the same fate. You, who were the first to bring disgrace on the proud name of Dancourt, can hope for nothing from the father whose heart you have broken and trampled in the dust but his curse for your wilfulness and folly. You are no longer my daughter. I have disowned you since the night you chose shame instead of the name of Dancourt and daughter of the Earl of Southwolde. Pursue the path that you have taken ; it is too late to turn back. I no longer know the girl who fled from her home with the plebeian Spaniard, Renzo Alvarez.”

This reply was indeed poor Adelene’s death-blow.

Ere a week had passed, the Earl of Southwolde was shocked by the sad intelligence of his unfortunate daughter’s death. By accident alone he saw the obituary in a London paper, saying that the wife of Renzo Alvarez, formerly Lady Adelene Dancourt, daughter of the Earl of Southwolde, had suddenly died at her husband’s home in Spain, leaving behind her a little girl babe.

For the first time since the erring yet innocent girl had fled from Merivale, the Earl broke down and wept bitterly.

There before him was the evidence that, though his daughter had chosen unwisely, she was a pure woman and a lawfully wedded wife, yet he had stabbed her heart as perhaps father had never before stabbed that of his child—doubtless he had killed her.

He saw it all now, when it was too late to recall, and none but those who heard his cry of anguish and

afterward saw his failing health and hopeless spirits, knew what he suffered ; but even yet he did not outwardly relent.

Not until he lay on his death-bed,—which was only a short time later,—did the name of the child who had gone to her grave unpardoned ever pass his stubborn lips ; then he called his son to his bedside and said to him :

“ Robert, I could not forgive Adelene in life ; but death has changed all. I pray to God that I may meet the poor, unfortunate child in heaven. And remember, when I am dead, that my last words to you were these : ‘ Let not the sin of the mother be visited on the child.’ I have longed to see the little daughter of Adelene ; but in life I could not forget that she was the offspring of Renzo Alvarez. But you, my son, who have never been so bitter, you will not think of this ; and if Adelene’s daughter should ever need a friend, you will befriend her, will you not ? I ask it of you ; I beg of you to watch over the motherless child, and see that no harm shall befall her. This is my last request ; and see that you hold it sacred. Merivale, my earldom, my wealth, are all yours ; but I trust to your honor to do by your sister’s child a good part.”

And Lord Robert Dancourt had faithfully promised. There at his father’s death-bed he swore to stand by the innocent babe then beneath the sunny skies of Spain. And perhaps no man would have been further from breaking his oath than he, had it not been for the influence of his wife.

Robert, Lord Dancourt, might have been a good man, but he lacked much of being a firm one. He knew his

own weakness—it was possible that he might have conquered it; but all her life long, Lady Dancourt had had her own way, and it was no intention of hers to surrender her will because of her marriage vows.

Like most men, Lord Dancourt dreaded a disturbance—my lady knew it; and it was for this reason, more than any particular power of his wife, that he had from the very time of their marriage yielded to a woman's word and a woman's desires rather than his own.

Almost unconsciously he had fallen into her way of thinking and acting; and when his father, the Earl of Southwolde, died, it seemed only natural that he should, before forming any definite plan concerning his sister's child, consult with his wife.

The fiat went forth at once.

Lord Dancourt might suit himself about befriending the child of Renzo Alvarez—he might keep his foolish oath to his father if he chose, and even send her money so long as she remained in Spain—he might see that she was well cared for and did not suffer; but as for ever bringing her to Merivale and associating her with Lady Dancourt's children—why, the thought was absurd, shocking! My lady would leave Merivale herself before it should ever be. No, indeed; the child of a disowned mother, who had eloped with a common Spaniard, was not half good enough to enter the doors of Lord Dancourt, Earl of Southwolde.

My lady, the Countess, even hinted that it had never been substantially proven that the child had a right to the name of Alvarez; but she dared not go further with this. She saw by the expression on her husband's face that she had reached her limit.

Yet the new Earl of Southwolde had not sufficient firmness to disregard all this from his wife. He might have gone to Spain himself and kept his promise to his father; but instead, he wrote a letter to Renzo Alvarez in regard to the child, which, to the great relief of all concerned, was returned unopened, just as Adelene's to her father had been.

This was open proof that the wronged husband would not readily overlook the fact that his wife had died of heart-break, and gone unforgiven to her grave.

It would be useless, the Countess of Southwolde declared, to make any attempt to befriend the child; and Lord Southwolde, seeing the wisdom in this assertion, eased his conscience with the thought. And as years went by, the promise to his dying father ceased to trouble him, and the very existence of his dead sister's child was almost forgotten.

The story of Lady Adelene Dancourt was far back in the past; and if the Countess of Southwolde, who had once so strongly condemned her and caused her husband to prove unfaithful to his father, his sister, and her child, remembered it, she never referred to it or brought it back to Lord Southwolde's mind.

Archibald and Maud, the children of the Earl and Countess of Southwolde, grew into manhood and womanhood. Often from their mother's lips had they heard the history of the Dancourts; yet neither of them knew the sad story of beautiful Lady Adelene, whose sweet face had once brightened the picture-gallery walls at Merivale, but whose place had for twenty years been vacant.

CHAPTER II.

A CHILDHOOD BETROTHAL.

TWENTY years had made but little changes in the appearance of Merivale. Perhaps there were a few traces of the ravages of time. A fallen chimney or a decaying wing might have shown that the place was a little older ; and here and there, where once a flourishing tree had stood in all the pride and beauty of life, destructive lightning or age had done its work, and like a slain giant it had fallen with outstretched limbs, soon to grow brown and crisp and waste away. Yet in some places the very sun fell in the same peculiar way, and the leaves on the trees made the same shadow they had when little Adelene Dancourt had traced the outlines on the wall with her tiny fingers and declared it to be the figure of a "great big man."

Inside of Merivale, more than out, the changes had been wrought.

The Earl and Countess of Southwolde were no longer young, their children were no longer children ; and Lady Southwolde often sighed as she looked in her mirror and discerned a wrinkle on her face, or a gray hair peeping out from beneath her puffs.

It seemed but a short time since her girlhood days ; yet there was her son Archie, Lord Dancourt, and her daughter Lady Maud, both fully grown up, and sufficient proof of the years that had flown by since she first became mistress of Merivale.

But, indeed, of her children Lady Southwolde was

justly proud. Worldly minded and shallow in most other things, her heart throbbed with true motherly love for her fair daughter and the manly heir of Merivale. Their joy was her joy, their sorrow her sorrow ; and for her either of their sakes she would have endured almost any pang.

There was no one who knew her but that knew of her passionate love for them. Even the Earl of Southwolde himself had often scolded her for her foolish fondness for them, telling her that she would ruin their dispositions for life.

But the Countess seemed to have no fear of this ; and even though Lady Maud grew up proud and rather overbearing, the devoted mother did not think it a fault. Even as a child, she had never once corrected her for treating an inferior with coldness and disdain. Often she would laugh and say : " Maud is myself over and over. She is a true aristocrat."

The haughty girl did indeed resemble her mother. There was no one who could deny that ; but Lady Maud was far more beautiful than the Countess of Southwolde had ever been. Some had declared her to be too tall or too pale—all had agreed that she was too cold and proud ; but those who admired the white lily or the statuesque style of beauty, were fully satisfied with Lady Maud Dancourt.

Lady Southwolde at least was contented with her. In her eyes, there was no more perfect beauty on earth than Maud's. Had she not created a *furor* in London last season, and refused a duke because of an engagement made in childhood between herself and Lord Charleroy ?

The Countess had fretted much over the loss of this

brilliant offer. She would gladly have consented for her daughter to become the Duchess of Ellesmere ; but Lady Maud was loyal to the man to whom she considered herself formally betrothed.

“ You will some day regret it, Maud, if you throw away this splendid opportunity for Lord Charleroy’s sake,” Lady Southwolde had told her. “ It was a foolish contract after all, and not in the least binding. Lord Charleroy will never expect you to fulfil it, I am quite sure.”

But Lady Maud refused to see it in this light. She knew the story of her childhood betrothal quite as well as her mother, and never had she thought of herself as mistress of any other home but Floradene, where all the Charleroyes had lived and died.

True, the contract had only been made between her father and Elwood, Lord Charleroy’s father when they were children romping together on the terrace at Merivale ; but the remembrance of a handsome boyish face and a pair of strong arms that had caught and held her after an exciting chase to imprint upon her lips the kiss of parting, had lived with the proud daughter of the Earl of Southwolde through many years.

Basil Charleroy and Robert Dancourt were the truest of boyhood friends, neither having a secret thought from the other, both loving each other with a sort of Damon and Pythias loyalty, that did not lessen with passing years.

Floradene was a magnificent estate adjoining Merivale ; and though Basil, Lord Charleroy was several years Robert’s senior, and had, long before the latter thought of marriage, taken to his luxurious home a

wife, the intimacy of their boyhood days was still kept up. And afterward, when both were wed, and Lord Dancourt had become the Earl of Southwolde, and they had children of their own, it seemed but natural that the son of Floradene and the daughter of Merivale should be meant for each other.

It would not only be the uniting of a long and true friendship, but it would be the joining of an old and honored name and a splendid estate. It was just the thing that the master of Floradene and the master of Merivale desired ; and when the little Maud was born and Lord Charleroy had looked upon her fair baby face as she lay in her cradle, he had said to Lord Southwolde :

“This is a wife for Elwood, Robert. Let us raise them for each other. I could wish for no better Lady Charleroy of Floradene.”

And vastly pleased with the suggestion, the Earl of Southwolde promised the hand of his baby daughter then and there. But it was not until some years later when Basil, Lord Charleroy lay on his death-bed that the contract was sealed. Then it was mutually settled that the hand of Lady Maud Dancourt and Elwood, Lord Charleroy should some day be joined in the sacred bonds of matrimony.

Even the Countess of Southwolde was then pleased and satisfied with the arrangement ; but it was only a few months after the old master of Floradene's death ere the young lord, and the future bride that had been selected for him parted—for his bereaved mother could not bear to remain in the house where her husband had died. And as years went by and Maud grew into lovely woomanhood, the prospect that opened up

before her seemed so brilliant that the Countess began to look even higher for her daughter than Lady Charleroy, mistress of Floradene.

She had heard of the present Lady Charleroy's death in Italy, whither the family had gone, and, later on, of the marriage of the only daughter of the house to Lord Thoresby of Scotland; and as Elwood, Lord Charleroy still remained away and did not return to Floradene, the Countess began to think he had either entirely forgotten his father's contract with the Earl of Southwolde or that he did not mean to fulfil it at all.

Vague rumors, too, had reached her ears of that young man's wildness. Of all the Charleroy's, she had heard that Elwood was by far the most reckless. On one occasion, Archie Dancourt had gone to Monte Carlo and there met Lord Charleroy, the playfellow of his childhood; and he had returned to Merivale with the information that Elwood was wasting the Charleroy fortune.

Lady Maud refused to credit it; but the Earl, who had seen so much of young manhood, was less sanguine. He said but little on the subject, but it was evident that he was troubled; and when the Duke of Ellesmere had proposed to his daughter, he had said to her :

“Wait until you have seen Lord Charleroy and judged him; then you can use your pleasure. If he is a man in the true sense of the word, he will in due time come to you.”

But though letters passed between Lord Charleroy and Archie Dancourt often after that meeting at Monte Carlo, the master of Floradene said nothing about

returning to his estate or coming to claim Lady Maud Dancourt for a wife.

Still, Lady Maud's faith was not shaken.

She had not lain eyes on Lord Charleroy since boyhood; yet remembering his handsome, patrician face as it then was, she could not believe him other than a man of honor. And with such a trust as hers, it was impossible for the Countess to convince her of her folly.

There was nothing left her but to await patiently the uncertain result, although she never tired of praising the Duke of Ellesmere or lost an opportunity of bringing to her daughter's mind the prize that she had lost.

But the time came when even Lady Maud began to grow less hopeful. Her pride had received a severe wound in the thought that Lord Charleroy had slighted the hand of the daughter of the Earl of Southwolde. She was disappointed and astonished, although loth to believe the master of Floradene less a nobleman than she had pictured him in her mind.

CHAPTER III.

THE EARL'S MISFORTUNE.

THE sunbeams dancing with glee among the geraniums in the windows of the spacious dining-room at Merivale on this fair June morning, and bathing the fluttering canaries in their gilded cages with its warm light, touched tenderly the yellow hair of Lady Maud Dancourt, and sported amongst the cut-glass and

painted china on the table, causing the large solitaire on the Countess of Southwolde's fore finger to flash and sparkle as she toyed with the spoon in her tiny, egg-shell cup, and mingle with the sun's bright rays.

There was a perturbed frown on Lady Southwolde's face that increased with each moment.

At length, having glanced impatiently several times toward the door, she looked at her daughter, who was gazing dreamily across the table, out through the window, and exclaimed :

"It is really too provoking, Maud, that Archie and the Earl" (she always called her husband "the Earl" when displeased with him) "must always be late for breakfast. One finds no comfort in a meal partaken of alone."

"Even with one's daughter, *ma mère*?" said Lady Maud, with a slow smile, without turning her eyes toward her mother.

"It is not that I ignore you, my dear," replied the Countess, still frowning. "The Earl is at all times a slow man, but at breakfast he is exasperating. It has been exactly a half-hour since I came into the dining-room"—looking up at the clock.

"It is Archie, no doubt," said Lady Maud, her eyes roving from their dreamy stare out the window toward the door. "I think Lord Dancourt began life with the determination of driving every one at Merivale mad."

Lady Southwolde sighed.

"Life at best, my dear, is a bed of thorns if one does not trample care heedlessly under foot."

"Archie is very thoughtless," continued Lady Maud, without seeming to have heard her mother's remark.

"Thoughtless, but good," agreed the Countess. "What would Merivale be without him?"

"A place of quiet and rest, at all events," retorted Lady Maud, with a shrug of her graceful shoulders. "A place, I dare say"—with another slow smile, that showed her even white teeth—"where breakfast would not grow cold because the son and father must have a discussion in the smoking-room or hall."

Lady Southwolde made no reply, but continued to rattle her spoon and look cross first at the dishes and then at the door. Lady Maud leaned back in her chair with the air of one having gained the better part of the argument; and silence ensued between them.

This, however, could not last long.

Presently Lady Southwolde glanced up again, looked at her daughter, whose eyes were turned away, glanced down at her plate half nervously, and, after another moment of thoughtful silence, inquired :

"How long has it been, Maud, since Archie heard from Lord Charleroy?"

Lady Maud started, and a flush of something like mortification crept up to her fair, proud face.

"You should know as well as I, mother; but—but I think it has been quite a while," she admitted reluctantly.

"True—several months, I believe," said the Countess, heedless of the reproach her daughter's words conveyed. "How little he must value Floradene!"

"And the prospect of the Earl of Southwolde's daughter for a wife," added Lady Maud, with a bitterness that the Countess had never before seen her display. "You cannot hide your meaning from me, mother."

“ You misjudge me, my dear,” replied Lady Southwolde kindly ; “ but it is true that I cannot like Lord Charleroy for his conduct.”

Lady Maud’s eyes grew moist with wounded pride and vexation.

“ I would rather not speak of it,” she said, a pained expression crossing her face.

“ But, Maud, my dear child, I see that you are allowing this affair to trouble you ; and it grieves me more than I can tell. You are very foolish. What is Lord Charleroy to one of your beauty and station ? You are only twenty, and I dare say are yet to meet the man you will love.”

Lady Maud laughed in spite of her vexation.

“ How very serious you are, mother !” she exclaimed. “ Perhaps I *am* foolish ; but no girl likes to be slighted.”

“ Young people should never give way to annoying thoughts, Maud ; but,”—with a deep sigh and a regretful glance in a mirror beyond her—“ when one gets my age—”

“ Why, mother, didn’t I hear you tell old Lord Hyde last season that you were only thirty-five ? I thought it awfully clever in you, but—”

“ Archibald !”

The voice from the doorway had broken in upon Lady Southwolde’s words, causing her to start and turn her eyes that way and give vent to that one word “ Archibald ” in a severe tone as she beheld the handsome, laughing face of her son.

“ Archibald, never allow your father to hear you say that,” she continued reprovingly, as Lord Dancourt advanced into the room.

"Trust to me for that, mother," he replied, with a confidential wink, as he took his seat at the table. "I have too much consideration for the domestic bliss to make such an exposure."

"But why have you kept us waiting, my son?" asked the Countess, striving to look incensed, but failing. "Breakfast is already spoiled."

"I beg forgiveness," said Lord Dancourt, contritely; "but I met Stevens on my way down stairs and relieved him of his mail. There were several letters for myself; and seeing that they were likely to be important, I paused to read them before coming into the dining-room."

"But your father,—what of him?" asked Lady Southwolde, growing positively cross again.

"I delivered his mail to him, mother dear, and he too seemed to be engrossed; as I passed the smoking-room and saw him actually buried in the depths of a letter."

Lady Southwolde's eyes began to flash. She arose from the table and gave her chair a little vicious push, starting towards the door with an air that said plainly, "I'll learn the meaning of this;" but Archie laughed outright and caught her by the hand as she was passing him.

"Come, mother," he said, "here are letters for yourself and Maud also; and besides that I have rather an interesting piece of news."

As he spoke, he drew several letters from his inner pocket, and gave half into his mother's hand and tossed the others to Lady Maud.

The Countess quietly resumed her seat.

"Whom does the news concern?" she asked with the natural curiosity of her sex.

Lady Maud, who was breaking the seal of a letter, paused to hear her brother's answer.

"It is concerning Lord Charleroy," he replied. "He is coming back to Floradene."

The Countess gave a cry of surprise, and Lady Maud, forgetting her self-control, sprang to her feet, her cheeks flushing, her eyes glowing with a pleased light.

"Coming to Floradene! Are you sure?" she cried, a little thrill of triumph in her voice, unconsciously placing her hand to the filmy lace at the throat of her pale blue morning gown.

"It is hardly possible that there is a mistake," replied Archie; "as the letter which announces his intended return is written from Paris by Lord Charleroy's own hand."

"And when does he expect to arrive?" asked Lady Southwolde, evidently pleased in spite of all her former protestations.

"The twenty-fifth, I believe," said Archie, taking the letter from his pocket and searching its pages again to make sure of the date. "Yes, the twenty-fifth; and he returns to Floradene, he writes, to remain. I think from what he says that he has sold their villa in Italy."

"Sold it!" gasped the Countess; "the beautiful villa that Lady Charleroy in her lifetime so greatly prized! What manner of man is this Lord Charleroy?"

"That remains to be proven," said Lord Dancourt. "The twenty-fifth is only two weeks from to-day."

"True. We can surely wait until then."

"It is enough to know that he is not a man devoid of honor, as you believed him, mother," said Lady Maud, with a smile ; who, in her excitement, had entirely forgotten breakfast, and had pushed her chair from the table preparatory to quitting the room.

"Has it yet been proven?" asked the Countess, unwilling to give in.

"Not entirely ; but the first step has been taken," replied Lady Maud, proudly. I think the time will come when you will see that I am right."

"Has Lord Southwolde heard it?" asked the Countess.

"I think not—at least not from me," replied Archie. "But it seems that he does not intend to come into the dining-room this morning. Perhaps he desires some one to come in search of him."

"I will go," said Lady Southwolde, rising ; and this time she went from the room without detention.

* * * * *

The Countess was astonished and startled when she entered the smoking-room and found her husband sitting there at the open window, heedless of the hot sun that poured in upon him, his face pale and full of suffering, his head bowed, and in his hand, clutched tightly, an open letter. His eyes were fixed on the carpet in a gloomy, troubled stare, and he neither saw Lady Southwolde as she entered the room nor heard her when she spoke to him.

"Robert !" she called uneasily, but he did not raise his eyes or look toward her.

"Robert ! are you ill?" she cried, alarmed at last and quickly approaching him.

He glanced up with a start, and she saw that his very lips were pale.

“What is it, my dear?” he asked wearily.

“You *are* ill, Robert! What has happened? What bad news have you had?” cried Lady Southwolde, in a quick, apprehensive tone, falling on her knees beside his chair, and taking his cold hand in her own.

This show of sympathy, which was so unusual for the Countess of Southwolde, seemed to touch the distressed Earl. He drew her head down to his bosom, caressing it tenderly, and, in a voice that was hoarse and unsteady, said :

“Don’t alarm yourself, Lura. I am not ill. Wait until I have collected myself, and you shall know all.”

“But you are as pale as death, and your hands are shaking,” persisted the Countess, trembling with dread. “Let me do something for you, Robert.”

“You cannot help me—no one can,” he replied huskily, passing his hand across his damp forehead.

“But let me share your trouble, my husband,” she pleaded. “Tell me what it is that distresses you. I cannot bear this suspense.”

“Good heaven, Lura! How can I tell you of my weakness?” the Earl burst out despairingly. “Even my children will blame and despise me when they know.”

Lady Southwolde drew back in alarm.

“Is it so bad as that?” she asked fearfully.

“It could not be worse,” he bitterly declared. “Can you imagine a more terrible blow than the sacrifice of Merivale, together with all the Southwolde estates?”

The Countess sprang to her feet, her eyes wide open with actual terror.

“Robert! Robert!” she gasped. “I cannot even imagine such a thing. The very thought is maddening! What are you saying, Lord Southwolde? What do you mean? Great God! It cannot be that—”

Her voice broke off and choked in her throat, her face paled to a deathly hue, and she staggered back, staring at her husband with distended eyes, but unable to proceed further.

“That I am a ruined man,” finished the Earl of Southwolde, desperately. “Though heaven knows I would have spared you this if it had been possible. I have been weak and imprudent, but I have suffered for my sin. Other men have done the same before me; yet there is no excuse for me. Blame me as you will—you cannot say too much.”

He buried his wretched face in his hands, and a groan of anguish burst from his lips, but the Countess did not approach him. Stunned and bewildered by the sudden blow, she stood there pale and speechless, staring at him with a look of horror in her eyes.

The Earl looked up again, and the expression on his drawn face was piteous.

“You know, Lura,” he continued, “the estates have brought us but small profits this year, and our expenses have been very great; so last winter when I was in London, and Mr. Lawton, my solicitor, came to me and informed me of the condition of my affairs, saying that my fund was not near so great as it had been, I did not hesitate to embark in a certain investment which seemed to hold great promise, even though I was compelled to mortgage almost the whole of the Southwolde estate to undertake it, so sure was I that

the money would double itself and retrieve my failing fortune.

“The prospect seemed glorious. If all went well,—and I could not believe that it would be otherwise,—the inheritance to which Archie, Lord Dancourt would succeed would be the richest of all the Southwoldes. No Earl of Merivale would ever have left his son more handsomely endowed. I was so certain of success that even the mortgages did not trouble me. I had a whole year in which to redeem the estate, and ere that time, I thought, I would be amply able to lift the claim.

“However, I said nothing of the transaction to any one—it was between myself and my solicitor alone; for I felt that the surprise and pleasure would be greater to you, Lura, when I came to you and told you of my good fortune, if you never knew of the loan on the estate of Southwolde. But”—here his voice broke and his lips quivered with pain—“with all my hope and fancied security, the investment failed me. Here in my hand is the letter from Mr. Lawton, which informs me of the terrible fact. In six months the mortgage will be called in, and I cannot meet its demand. The world must then know that I am a ruined man—a record which was never before left by an Earl of Southwolde.”

The despair on Lady Southwolde's face could not be pictured, as she had stood there, grasping tightly with one hand the back of a chair, while her husband had told her the story of their ruin.

For the first time she spoke, and her voice was hoarse and hollow.

“Do you realize the enormity of your crime, my

lord?" she asked. "You have robbed your son of his inheritance—yes, *robbed* him."

"It is true," said the Earl, humbly. "I can leave him nothing. God help me!"

"And you have ruined your daughter's happiness," continued the Countess, mercilessly. "When she learns the truth, it will break her proud heart."

"But if she marries Lord Charleroy—" the Earl began hopefully. But Lady Southwolde interrupted him with a hysterical laugh, saying disdainfully :

"Lord Charleroy! How *can* she marry him now, if reports be true? Oh, it would be a pitiful ending to your foolish contract, my lord! Lord Charleroy, who had wasted the fortune of his ancestors, and Lady Maud, the daughter of a bankrupt Earl! Oh, it will kill my poor child—I am sure it will kill her!"

And the Countess, losing all power of self-control, threw herself upon her knees, and, burying her face in the cushions of the chair, burst into a despairing fit of weeping.

The Earl arose, and, going to her, placed his hand on her head.

"Pray be calm, Lura. For God's sake, don't give way like this," he besought her. "All hope may not yet be gone. Perhaps something will turn up to save us. Look up! Some one will hear you, and Archie and Maud will be coming to the spot."

"Why should I care? They must know the truth," she replied, sobbing bitterly.

The Earl knelt down and took her tenderly in his arms.

"They must *not* know until the last hour, Lura," he

declared. "Why should we not bear the sorrow for them until we can no longer bear it?"

"Yes, yes, we will. We will shield our children until there is no longer a hope," consented the unhappy Countess readily, growing calmer with the thought.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. LAWTON'S VISIT.

IN all her life, the Countess of Southwolde had never experienced such a bitter trial as enduring in secret the terrible sorrow which weighed upon her heart. But for her children's sake she kept her promise; and after the first outburst of pain and despair, she bore bravely up, keeping her composure so well that no one even suspected that anything at Merivale had gone wrong.

Lady Maud seemed happier than usual, and talked much of Lord Charleroy's return, wondering what he would be like, and what he would say to her when they met; asking her mother over and over if she thought he would be pleased with her beauty, and if he would remember their childhood frolics, and how they parted on that day so long ago.

Lady Southwolde would always reply in a manner that pleased her; but at the same time she would groan inwardly with pain, and look at the unsuspecting girl pityingly, as she thought of the sword suspended by a single hair over her fair head.

The Earl of Southwolde looked forward to the return of Lord Charleroy, the son of his boyhood friend,

with but little hope now, since his great misfortune ; for it was just as the Countess had said—it would be a poor match for the master of Floradene, as well as Lady Maud. Neither of them could be expected to fulfil the promise made by their parents, in their childhood.

The thought was indeed a sore regret to the impoverished Earl, for his greatest desire had been to hold the contract with Basil Charleroy sacred ; but now he almost dreaded the meeting that he had once so much desired, between his daughter and the present Lord Charleroy.

He knew not what would be the issue of the meeting ; and if they should chance to fall in love with each other, he thought, it would only make matters worse. He did not know how eagerly Lady Maud looked forward to the day that she would once again see the face of the boy for whom she had wept long years before at parting, and that she was counting the days that intervened between the day that Archie received his letter and the twenty-fifth, just as if he had indeed been her true, acknowledged lover.

However, the Earl knew that she had refused all other offers of marriage because of that early betrothal, and the possibility of her learning to care for Lord Charleroy was no longer a pleasure to him.

He spoke with his wife on the subject, but she gave him no encouragement.

“Well,” she said, “suppose they do fall in love with each other, Lord Southwolde. What then?”

“Why, it would be the very worst thing that could happen!” the Earl cried. “Even if Lord Charleroy had not been extravagant he could not begin to save me

with justice to himself, and—I might as well be plain with you, Lura—I can see no other means of saving ourselves, except through our children. If Maud could succeed in marrying a rich husband, or Archie could find a rich wife before the six months are out, it would indeed be a blessing. No one need ever know that we were trembling on the brink of ruin.”

But the Countess gave a hopeless sigh of despair.

“Such a thing is an impossibility, my lord, in such a short length of time,” she declared. “We might as well speak of raising the money. The Duke of Ellesmere, whom I believe is still in love with Maud, went abroad when she refused him, and there is no likelihood of him returning; and as for Archie—well, it is simply madness to think if *him* seeking a wife. He will not, I assure you, unless you tell him the whole truth; and then he would not be satisfied unless he found a woman he loved. But he is yet so young to think of marriage, Robert!”—regretfully.

“A man at twenty-three is quite old enough to know his own mind,” said the Earl, decisively.

“But he may change it when he grows older.”

“Not if he is the right sort of a man; and Archie is that, I think.”

“At all events, there is no hope from that source; I feel quite sure of it,” said the Countess, dolefully. And Lord Southwolde too felt that this was true enough, and became more and more discouraged with each day that passed.

A week had gone by when Mr. Lawton, who had been the family solicitor of the Dancourts for years, and whose interests he looked after the same as he did his very own, came down from London to Merivale for

the sole purpose of having a private talk with the Earl.

Lord Southwolde was surprised but pleased when the name of that worthy gentleman was announced; and he went into his presence with his heart beating rather faster than usual, feeling sure that the visit meant something either in his favor or against him.

Mr. Lawton, who was a small man, with shrewd, dark eyes and bushy gray beard, arose as the Earl entered the room, and shook his hand warmly.

"Believe me, my lord," he said, "my heart is with you in your trouble."

"I do, my friend, most assuredly, I do," replied Lord Southwolde, sincerely. "But tell me, is there no hope for me in this unfortunate matter?"

Mr. Lawton reseated himself and drew his brows down thoughtfully, beating a tat-too with his nails on the marble of the table at his side.

"It seems to me that you have been very rash, my lord," he said not unkindly.

"Yet the thought is little comfort to me, Mr. Lawton," the Earl replied with an impatient laugh. "There is no man but that will tell me the same, now that I have lost."

"True," admitted the solicitor, with a smile. "I meant no reproach. We are all prone to mistakes."

"But you did not even advise me against it," said the Earl.

"Because I would have done the same thing myself, Lord Southwolde. That is why I am so anxious to help you."

The Earl for a moment looked hopeful,

“Do you think it possible that the loan could be renewed, Mr. Lawton?” he asked.

The solicitor shook his head decisively.

“No indeed,” he said, “it could not. I ascertained that fact most positively before coming here. I went to see the attorneys through whom the money was borrowed, a few days before leaving London, and had a talk with them.”

“What did they say?” asked the Earl, eagerly.

“That the gentleman to whom the money they had loaned belonged was already greatly displeased with the transaction, and that under no circumstances could the mortgage be renewed. The fact was, they said, the money had been put out according to their own counsel, and they had written nothing concerning it to the gentleman in question at the time, as his residence was in Spain, and they had been appointed sole agents for him in England over two hundred thousand pounds. The gentleman is immensely wealthy, and seldom troubles himself concerning the interest of the money in his English advisers’ hands, leaving it entirely with them to invest for him or do with it as they willed ; but it happened that a few months ago he wrote to them and inquired after this money.

“The solicitors, of course, answered at once and gave him the details of their transactions ; and what was their surprise on receiving a stormy letter from that gentleman in reply ? Their management in the case of the mortgage on Southwolde, without his consent, was indeed deplorable, he wrote them ; and if he had known, the Earl of Southwolde should not have had a shilling at his hands. He bade them close the loan at once if possible ; but this of course cannot be done

until the year is out. You are safe until then, my lord ; but I thought it best to come down and tell you this as soon as I had heard it."

The Earl had listened attentively to every word, and his face had grown pale and perplexed as Mr. Lawton proceeded. As the latter ceased speaking, there was a moment of troubled silence between them, and then Lord Southwolde looked up, saying :

"This is very strange, Mr. Lawton. I should think that a mortgage on Southwolde would be deemed as safe as anything. Who is this man from whom the money is borrowed? I left it all so entirely with you at the time that I did not even learn the man's name who now has such a claim upon Southwolde."

"I can tell you nothing about him," said Mr. Lawton, "except that his signature is Renzo Alvarez."

If a thunderbolt had exploded at the feet of the Earl of Southwolde, the effect could not have been more startling than the pronounciation of that name in connection with his great misfortune. He sprang to his feet with a hoarse, incredulous cry, exclaiming wildly :

"Renzo Alvarez! Great God! No, no, Mr. Lawton, you have made some terrible mistake! It is impossible! The man to whom I am indebted is *not* Renzo Alvarez!"

The solicitor was amazed ; for he knew nothing of the past and the unfortunate marriage of Lady Adeline Dancourt, as it was a subject never referred to by the Earl. He could not understand this sudden outburst.

"I have told you the truth, my lord," he said earnestly. "There is no mistake. The man that

holds the mortgage over Southwolde is indeed Renzo Alvarez."

"Then, God help me!" groaned the Earl, dropping back into his chair with a hopeless look of despair. "I am without doubt a ruined man, Mr. Lawton."

"I do not in the least comprehend you, my lord," said the solicitor, apologetically.

"Of course you do not; but if you did, you cannot help me now," replied the Earl, bitterly.

"Let me hear and judge for myself," urged Mr. Lawton. And knowing that he could safely put his trust in this upright solicitor, who had served him since the first years of his succession to the earldom of Southwolde, the Earl did not hesitate to tell him the whole story of his half-sister's marriage which had darkened the last years of both her own and her father's life. He did not even omit his own failure to fulfil the promise made to his father on his death-bed, saying that heaven was taking vengeance upon him at last.

When he had finished Mr. Lawton arose to go, and there was little encouragement in his face.

"You were right, my lord," he said. "You can expect nothing—no leniency—from the hands of Renzo Alvarez. If you will pardon me, I should, under the circumstances, feel bitter towards every living Dan-court myself. It is very, very hard for you; but I can only bid you hope. There are several months yet before you; and you may trust me to do all in my power to save you from ruin."

CHAPTER V.

A FAINT HOPE.

BUT all cheering words were now lost on the Earl of Southwolde. Nothing could have been more bitter to him than the knowledge that Southwolde must fall into the hands of Renzo Alvarez, the man whose very name at Merivale had so long been scorned and despised. The blow of the failure itself had not been more crushing to him. It seemed to him now that he could have endured all else better than this last humiliation.

Was it retribution? Had Nemesis laid hands upon Merivale at last?

Often in his dreams the Earl had seen the beautiful face of his sister, Lady Adelene; and her eyes had always looked at him with anger and reproach. Once she had appeared before him in his study and bidden him to follow her, and powerless to refuse, he had obeyed. She had led him up the stairs, down the dark upper corridor, and reaching the door of the picture gallery she had opened it and glided noiselessly within. Swiftly, but like a shadow, she had moved down its gloomy length, between the tall portraits of the Earls and ladies of Southwolde, that looked awfully life-like in the semi-darkness, never pausing until she had reached the farthest corner where her own picture, with its face downward, lay. Here she stopped and turned toward him with a face as stern and pale as marble, pointing to the discarded

portrait there on the floor. The Earl reached forth his hand and attempted to speak to her, but quickly—suddenly—she vanished into mist, and only the echo of her wild, mocking laughter rang through gallery and corridor.

The Earl awoke, startled and trembling, and the dream bore upon his mind no little until he had had the portrait removed from the gallery and placed in a closet where it might never fall beneath his sight.

“Poor Adelene! poor, unfortunate Adelene!” he had murmured to himself for weeks afterward when alone; and his heart had ached and his conscience had smote him for his selfish neglect to her memory and her child. But it was too late now to make atonement, he told himself; and all his good impulses were again soon gone.

He never thought that some day he might bitterly repent having made an enemy of his sister’s hated husband, Renzo Alvarez; he never dreamed that some day he would be so completely in his power that he could be compelled to leave the shelter of grand old Merivale at his command.

Long after Mr. Lawton had left him, the miserable Earl sat there alone in the library, trying to realize fully his unhappy situation, and over and over these words kept ringing in his ears :

“The mills of the gods grind slowly,
But they grind exceeding fine.”

Ah, how bitter, bitter it was to think that he had brought upon himself his own ruin. How Renzo Alvarez would triumph over him, he thought, when he learned that he could not pay the debt on Southwolde.

It seemed to the Earl that death would be far easier than this public disgrace.

"I cannot bear it—I *cannot*," he moaned desperately. "Something *must* be done."

But what that "something" was to be, neither the Earl nor the Countess, in whom he confided, could conjecture.

Lady Southwolde could hardly credit it when her husband told her they were in Renzo Alvarez's power,—that it was he who held the mortgage over Southwolde,—it seemed so impossible.

"I cannot believe it," she said in wild alarm. "Oh, it is not true, Robert—it cannot be! Renzo Alvarez was a poor man; he had nothing, not even a name. How could *he* hold such an enormous mortgage over Southwolde?"

"Much can be accomplished in twenty years, my dear," the Earl replied gloomily. "There are many self-made men nowadays that are fabulously wealthy. Renzo Alvarez is doubtless one of these."

"And will he take Merivale from us, and come here to live, Robert?" the Countess asked in a gasping, despairing voice.

"It is quite probable," said the Earl, with a mirthless laugh. "If his daughter is still alive,—and I presume she is, having heard nothing to the contrary,—he will be quite pleased to make her heiress of Merivale. With their great wealth and an estate like this, Renzo Alvarez's lack of a pedigree will not amount to much in the eyes of the world, I fancy."

"My God! it is terrible," Lady Southwolde groaned. This was all she could say—further words failed her;

for she knew that both the Earl and herself were powerless to avert the impending calamity.

From this day, however, the misery and suspense began to tell on the Countess ; for she felt that each sunset brought them nearer to their doom. She grew pale and hollow-eyed, and even her children, whom she looked at so often with pity, murmuring, " Poor Archie, poor Maud, how will they bear it ? " began to notice the change.

But when they questioned her, she only replied that she had not been well of late ; and they never doubted her, or suspected her secret sorrow.

The Earl of Southwolde declared that he no longer had the least hope ; yet, in spite of this assertion, he looked eagerly each day for a letter from his solicitor, and was always disappointed when it did not come.

One morning, a week after Mr. Lawton's visit, and a day before Lord Charleroy was expected to arrive at Floradene, Lord Southwolde went into the dining-room earlier than usual, and found his wife already at the table, looking eager and flushed over a sealed letter which she held in her hand.

She was alone, and, as he entered the room, she arose hastily to her feet, and came toward him.

" Robert," she said breathlessly, holding the letter out to him, " here is news from Mr. Lawton, I am quite sure of it. I recognized his handwriting as soon as Stevens gave me the mail. God grant that it brings us hope ! "

The Earl took the letter and broke the seal with nervous hands, seating himself at the table as he did so.

The Countess resumed her place, and Lord Southwolde opened the business-like sheet and read :

“DEAR LORD SOUTHWOLDE: I learn this morning, through Messrs. Clarkson and Hyde, that Renzo Alvarez is *dead*; but do not build your hopes too high, as his heiress, a young girl of eighteen, survives him. I can write you nothing definite at present, but with many good wishes I am, as ever,

“Your friend and adviser,

“JAMES LAWTON.”

In an agitated voice, the Earl had read the brief but astonishing message through, and Lady Southwolde, in her excitement, had sprung to her feet, startled and trembling, placing her hand over her wildly beating heart, and exclaiming:

“*Dead?* Renzo Alvarez dead? O Robert, *does it* bring us hope?”

The Earl looked up, and his face had grown quite pale.

“I cannot tell,” he replied; “yet it surely must be in our favor. If it was not for this girl—”

“But she is so young, Robert, and a woman, too,” the Countess interrupted eagerly; “it is hardly likely that she will be as hard upon us as her father. She will know nothing of business affairs, I feel sure; and Renzo Alvarez’s claim on Southwolde will perhaps be placed entirely in his solicitors’ hands.”

“But they can do us equally as much harm, Lura,” said the Earl, fearing, as Mr. Lawton had written, ‘to build his hopes too high.’

“No, indeed, Robert, I will not think so,” replied Lady Southwolde. “Messrs. Clarkson and Hyde may

be persuaded to listen to reason, and Renzo Alvarez would not. We are far safer in those gentlemen's hands."

But the Earl could not so readily feel his security.

"Time alone will tell," he said. "I think I could know better what to expect if I had seen Renzo Alvarez's daughter."

"Could you not go to Spain?" asked the Countess, quickly.

The Earl studied a moment before replying, then a sudden thought seemed to strike him.

"I could go, Lura," he said; "but I believe it will be far better to invite the girl to Merivale. By George, my dear! I am quite sure that it is a bright idea, if you'll agree to it," he wound up, bringing his hand down upon the table.

"But will she come, after all these years, and perhaps knowing all the circumstances?" asked Lady Southwolde, evidently displeased.

"We could try her, at least," said the Earl, hopefully.

"She will certainly understand why it is done."

"How can she? No one except Mr. Lawton knows that we are on the verge of ruin. She need not learn just at first that we are unable to repay her father's loan on Southwolde; and will it seem strange to her that we should remember her now, even at this late hour, in her sad affliction? She is all alone since her father's death; and I tell you, laying our own interests aside, Lura, it is right that we should show her this respect. It is due her that she should be invited to Merivale."

"Oh, it is so much like a parasite, Robert!" ex-

claimed the Countess, who had not forgotten her old-time distaste to Renzo Alvarez's child.

"It looks so," admitted Lord Southwolde; "but if I had not listened to you, Lura, I would never have neglected my sister's daughter at all."

"Of course. Blame a woman for everything, as she has no means of helping herself," snapped the Countess, who never liked to be told of a fault. "I must admit even now that I have no longing for Miss Alvarez's society. She will not be welcome at Merivale, be assured of that. If I consent to equalizing myself with her, it will only be for my own interest and my children's sake. If it will help to save us, she may come here, and I will fawn on her as much as it pleases you, Lord Southwolde," contemptuously.

"It is the best we can do," said the Earl, thoughtfully; "there is at least hope in it. I think I will write to her at once."

"I suppose, then, Archie and Maud are to know everything," said the Countess, coldly.

The Earl started.

"I had not thought of that," he replied. Then, after a moment's reflection: "They need not know all. We can tell them the girl's history, and her relation to the Dancourts. That will be sufficient."

Lady Southwolde sighed profoundly.

"Ah, my lord, if you had only been wise!"

"But I was not, my lady, and we must make the best of it. If I had been—but there! be cautious," he broke off, looking toward the door. "Here come Archie and Maud together, and there is not a cloud on their young faces. God grant that this misfortune may not mar their lives!"

Lady Southwolde looked up with a fond smile, that put to flight the troubled expression on her face, as her children entered the room, and she thought she had never seen them look so handsome.

Ah, Southwolde could never know a better Earl than Archie, she thought with a wild pang of regret as she looked up at his handsome, noble face ; but the title would avail him nothing if they lost all.

Lord Dancourt's face was indeed one that was pleasing to look at. He neither resembled his father nor his mother ; for there was a certain firmness and frankness about his face that neither of them possessed. The Earl often declared that he was a perfect likeness to Captain Marmaduke Dancourt, who had lived and died the life of a hero almost a century ago. Lord Dancourt expressed himself vastly flattered, and would frequently stand before the picture of the brave captain, which hung in the gallery at Merivale, and gaze at it with a smile of derision at the bare idea that *he* resembled that handsome, noble face. But the clear, deep blue eyes and curly dark brown hair that waved back from a high, broad, intellectual forehead were indeed in both the same. Perhaps their mouths were different—Lord Dancourt's might have been more prone to laughter ; but even here there was a likeness, for the small brown mustache that darkened rather than concealed the upper lip was precisely the same. The captain, too, might have been taller—his portrait looked so for Archie was not above the average height.

This picture of Captain Dancourt came into Lord Southwolde's mind at once this morning as his son

entered the dining-room ; and the resemblance between the two had never before so forcibly struck him.

“I could imagine, as I looked up, Archie, that you were Marmaduke Dancourt’s ghost entering,” he said, “you are so much like him.”

“Then the thought must have frightened you, father,” Lord Dancourt replied with a smile ; “for you are positively paler than I have seen you for months past.”

“It is true, father,” put in Lady Maud ; “and mother, too,” glancing from one to the other in surprise, “is not looking well.”

“We are troubled,” said the Earl, determined to get the worst over with at once. “Be seated and I will explain to you.”

Archie and Maud obeyed, and in wondering silence listening to the Earl while he told them the story of Lady Adelene Dancourt, which was entirely new to them, ending by saying that he had just received the intelligence of Renzo Alvarez’s death.

Archie seemed more surprised with the story than Lady Maud. It was a great surprise to him.

“Why, father, I had not known all these years that you even had a half-sister,” he cried. “It seems to me a cruel thing that a man should discard his only daughter because she had married unwisely. The Earl of Southwolde must have been a very hard-hearted man.”

“It was no more than she deserved, I think,” said Lady Maud. “I do not blame the Earl.”

“It was not only hard-hearted, but it was inhuman, to let the poor girl die heart-broken and unforgiven,” declared Lord Dancourt, waxing warmer. “If I had

been in your place, father, I think I would have braved all and gone to her."

The Earl flushed; he could not help it, with the clear, honest, half-reproachful eyes of his son upon him.

"It was impossible," he replied lamely.

"Certainly it was," said Lady Southwolde, coming to the rescue. "And, beside, Lady Adelene's conduct was severely censured by every one; so much so that when she died and her child was left and her father bade Robert on his death-bed to look after it, I dared not allow him risk bringing the babe to Merivale, knowing that the public opinion would be great against us."

"But that is all forgotten now," assured the Earl, who did not desire opposition in his plan of inviting Miss Alvarez to Merivale.

"Mother was right," defended Lady Maud. "The presence of such a child at the home of the Southwolde's could not have been desirable."

The Earl weakened, but he did not lose hope.

"Indeed I regret not having fulfilled my promise to my father," he said.

"I should think you would feel that way," said Archie. "But is not this girl still living?"

"Yes; and it is of her that I wish to speak," the Earl replied. "I desire to make atonement even now, Archie. Since Renzo Alvarez's death, his daughter is all alone. She is young, very young—only eighteen—and there is no one left to care for her. Why should we not invite her now to Merivale?"

"We can—we will," agreed Lord Dancourt, eagerly. "It is just what we ought to do."

But the suggestion caused an open outburst from Lady Maud.

"Father, you will not think of such a thing!" she cried. "Surely, after all these years you will not bring that girl—this daughter of a common-born Spaniard—to Merivale, to be placed on an equal with the Earl of Southwolde's daughter!"

"You must remember that her mother was the daughter of an earl of Southwolde," reminded Archie, sharply.

"But there is a *bête noire* in almost every family," retorted Lady Maud.

The Earl looked at his wife for encouragement.

She gave it unwillingly.

"Your father knows best, my dear," she said to her daughter.

"And you, too, mother would invite her here!" exclaimed Lady Maud, in surprise.

"If it is your father's wish," she replied.

Lord Dancourt looked at her admiringly.

He thought he had never seen his mother act so sensibly before.

"Of course. It is our duty," he said.

"Duty!" sneered Lady Maud. "It is absurd. I promise you that if she comes to Merivale, I shall behave abominably to her."

Lord Southwolde looked helpless and undecided.

Archie, seeing his hesitation, looked at Lady Maud witheringly, then at his father, and said:

"If you desire to do what is right, you will not listen to a woman: you will look after the daughter of Lady Adeline Dancourt as you promised, and see that she has a friend. Maud is prejudiced; but I tell you it is

monstrous to think of turning your back upon the girl because her mother ran away and married a man she loved, who did not happen to have been born of royal blood."

"If she comes here I will not like her," repeated Lady Maud, stoutly.

"But in this case I *cannot* listen to you, Maud," said Lord Southwolde, desperately, rising from his chair. "The invitation to Renzo Alvarez's daughter must be sent; so there's an end of it."

CHAPTER VI.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

It was very seldom that Lady Maud Dancourt was thwarted in having her own way, and her father's refusal to comply with her wishes in not inviting Miss Alvarez to Merivale had angered and astonished her. She had gone to her room and wept bitter tears, refusing to be comforted by her mother, who told her she was inclined to believe that the girl would not accept the invitation at all.

"She will, I feel sure of it," sobbed the spoiled beauty. "Nothing could seem grander to a person of her kind than to come to Merivale and live with the Earl and Countess of Southwolde. It will be 'the Earl, my uncle,' and 'the Countess, my aunt.' Oh!" with a burst of hysterical laughter, "it is too much to endure, mother!"

Lady Southwolde looked very downcast; but know-

ing the circumstances, she strove to encourage her daughter, for she remembered the time when her feelings had been quite the same as Lady Maud's.

"The girl is not poor, my dear," she said ; "she will be far from being a dependant."

But this was nothing to Lady Maud. She continued to weep, regardless of all her mother could say to her, until the Countess, growing impatient, remarked :

"You will be in a nice plight to receive Lord Charleroy, if he should come to-morrow, if you continue at this rate, Maud. He will see by your red and swollen eyes that you are in trouble, mark my word for it."

"I do not care," she replied unhappily ; but her sobs ceased, and she dried her eyes instantly, in spite of the assertion. "I suppose he, as well as every one else, must know this girl's history and her relation to us anyway, when she comes."

"But it is time enough to spoil your eyes, my dear, when the invitation has been accepted. Ah, Maud, you know so little yet of true unhappiness," said Lady Southwolde, sadly.

"And what does my mother know of it?" inquired Lady Maud, with an incredulous smile.

"More than you suspect. But, there ! why should we be melancholy ? Be of good cheer, darling," said the Countess, consolingly, going over to her daughter's chair and kissing her pale face. "You have been looking very happy of late, and it pleases me to see you so. Live in the sunlight while you can, for the shadows will come soon enough. I am sure you wish to look well to-morrow."

“Yes, indeed, mother,” replied Lady Maud, recovering her spirits and smiling brightly; “and I promise you that I shall.”

“Do you think Lord Charleroy will come to Meriville as soon as he reaches home?” asked the Countess, as she started from the room.

“I hardly know,” answered Lady Maud; “yet I shall look for him.”

And, indeed, the thought of Lord Charleroy’s homecoming soon drove all unpleasant things from Lady Maud’s mind. As the day wore away and visions of the morrow crowded into the proud but foolish girl’s brain, Miss Alvarez was entirely forgotten. Even the Earl was forgiven, and was surprised at the rare smile his daughter gave him when they met again, the following morning.

It was just such a day as Lady Maud would have had it. She had fretted much the afternoon previous because the sun had gone under a cloud, saying that if it was an ugly day Lord Charleroy would be sure not to come to Merivale; but when she had opened her eyes and seen the sunlight streaming through the curtains of her room, across the soft white ground and blue forget-me-nots of the carpet, she sprang to her feet and flung the window-blinds wide open, looking up at the cloudless blue skies and saying:

“Thank heaven that the day is clear! Floradene could never look better to its master than in a sunshine like this. He will not be sorry to get home again, I fancy. How I hope that everything will please him!”

And then she stopped and wondered at her own interest in all that concerned Lord Charleroy. Why, it

could not be that she cared for him yet, she thought; for when they parted he was only a boy. And how did she know that he would admire her? He might even ask her to release him from their childhood betrothal, saying that it was a foolish contract, and that the heart of the boy was not the same as that of the man.

"If it should be so, I will give him his freedom and forget him," Lady Maud proudly decided.

But she took none the less pains with her toilet that day. She was not sure whether Lord Charleroy would come to Merivale that morning, afternoon, or evening; but she was determined to look well even if he should come upon her unawares. What woman would not? Lady Maud's vanity was not greater than the rest of her sex, even though she knew that there were few faces which could rival her own.

Hers was a beauty, however, that needed but little adornment.

The dress that she chose that day was of soft, clinging white, with pale pink rosebuds among the lace on her bosom and in the coils of her silky, golden hair, and Lord Dancourt, who seldom noticed her beauty, remarked that he had never seen her look fairer.

But the morning passed and Lord Charleroy did not put in an appearance. Lady Maud was disappointed, but she concealed it well.

"Of course we should not have expected him this morning," she said carelessly. "He has hardly had time to arrive at Floradene."

But Archie contradicted it.

"He must have arrived there at least before six,"

he said, "unless something delayed him. I certainly expected him at Merivale this morning."

This was enough to vex Lady Southwolde and make Lady Maud very ill at ease; and if the latter became restless as the hours went by and Lord Charleroy still did not come, she was hardly to be censured for it.

Lord Dancourt suggested that he go to Floradene and learn if my lord had arrived, saying that it was due him that some one from Merivale should meet him, but Lady Maud strongly opposed it.

"Let him come of his own will," she said half indignantly. "I am sure he has been dilatory enough about coming to Merivale. We need not coax him here."

"Maud is right," said Lady Southwole, coming into the drawing-room while the two were speaking, and hearing the remark. "Lord Charleroy deserves to be let alone forever. If I were in your place, my dear," to her daughter, "I would not waste another thought on the master of Floradene."

Lady Maud walked over to the window and looked out, in order to conceal her vexation, which was plainly written on her face.

"Ah, well, *ma mère*," she replied in an indifferent tone, that belied her feelings, "we have not quite sufficient cause to condemn poor Lord Charleroy. I dare say he will yet put in an appearance and satisfy us that his tardiness has been inevitable."

"I must have good proof of it before that young man can clear himself in my eyes," declared the Countess, severely, seating herself comfortably. "Now, when your father came to see me, Maud, he was in

constant dread of a dismissal, I was so quick to see a wrong or a slight. I was only the daughter of Lord Hearne, of a good old name, but not an abundance of money; yet I would not have yielded one inch of my independence to have been Countess of Southwolde and mistress of Merivale."

Lady Maud turned quickly, and there was a look of pain in her dark blue eyes.

"Mother," she said, "I am as proud as any girl—I am sure of it; but I am *just*, as well. I am determined not to marry any one"—firmly—"until I have seen Lord Charleroy; so you might as well let me have my way a little while longer."

"You have had your way all your life long," replied the Countess, sharply.

"True," admitted Lady Maud, unhesitatingly, "and I am not ungrateful for the indulgence."

"Yet you persist in your defence of Lord Charleroy," said the Countess, sighing.

Lady Maud smiled.

"Mother, you puzzle me," she said. "I remember the time when you were pleased for me to think well of the master of Floradene; yet now you dislike him. Why is it?"

Lord Dancourt, who had flung himself upon the sofa and taken no part in the conversation until this moment, looked up with a light laugh, and remarked:

"I am sure it isn't hard to understand. The Duke of Ellesmere has completely outrivalled Lord Charleroy in mother's fancy."

"The Duke of Ellesmere!" repeated Lady Maud, scornfully. "I would not marry him if he was the last man on earth. What is he, after all?"

"A duke, my dear," replied Archie, dryly.

"When you have said that, it is certainly all," declared Lady Maud, vivaciously ; "but when one has seen him, the prestige of the title is entirely lost."

"The Duke is a thorough gentleman," said the Countess, indignantly.

"Oh, certainly a gentleman—what there is of him," admitted Lady Maud, coldly.

"Is there not enough of him, my dear?" asked Archie, laughing.

"I could wish for more if I was in love with him."

"But think of the advantage—even though your husband was a duke, he would look up to you."

"I do not crave the honor," answered Lady Maud, feigning to shudder.

"But how do you know that Lord Charleroy has grown tall? He may be even smaller than the Duke," said Archie, teasingly.

"But you have seen him, and known better," replied Lady Maud, anxiously.

"Yet you have never asked me."

"I was sure that he was very tall and strong. Is he?"

"Oh, don't worry, my dear. I dare say he will reach your shoulder," consoled Lord Dancourt.

"Archie!" she exclaimed reproachfully. But at that instant the sound of carriage-wheels fell upon their ears, and Lord Dancourt sprang to his feet and hastened over to the window. Lady Maud too turned her head quickly and looked down the carriage-drive.

"It must be Lord Charleroy at last," said Archie,

as the horses' heads came in sight. "Better late than never!"

"But do not let him see us here," said Lady Maud, nervously, drawing back behind the curtains as the carriage drew nearer.

Lord Dancourt, however, did not heed the warning. He was determined to see who occupied the carriage, and, as driver drew rein and the door was opened, he gave vent to a cry of surprise.

"Maud, look quickly! It is not Lord Charleroy!" he exclaimed.

No need to call Lady Maud's attention, for she had already seen through the curtains, and her heart had sunk with disappointment. Two ladies had alighted from the carriage, and the coachman had closed the door behind them. One was perhaps thirty, yet her face was quite pretty and young, and the other was a mere girl, whose striking beauty drew a prolonged whistle from Lord Dancourt's lips, and the remark:

"By Jove! how delighted I am that it wasn't Lord Charleroy! Maud, who the deuce is that pretty girl?"

"I am sure I have never seen her before," replied Lady Maud, breathing quickly in her excitement. "Mother, do you know them?"

Lady Southwold had arisen from her chair and come over to the window; and as her daughter spoke, she looked out over her shoulder, and, as she saw the two ladies below, exclaimed in surprise:

"Why, the elder one looks precisely like Rita Charleroy! I do believe it is!"

"Lord Charleroy's sister?" asked Lady Maud, excitedly.

"Yes ; you know she married Lord Thoresby of Scotland. It is she," looking closer, "I am sure of it ; though I have not seen her before in many years."

"But the girl," said Archie, anxiously. "What of her?"

"I do not know her," replied the Countess. "We will soon learn, however, as they are coming in."

As she said this, they withdrew from the window and seated themselves apart from each other ; and a few moments later, the visitors were ushered into the room.

The Countess arose to receive them, extending her hand with slight hesitation to the elder lady, and saying :

"Am I mistaken, or is this indeed Rity Charleroy of Floradene?"

"I was once that, my dear Countess," the lady replied, advancing and warmly embracing Lady Southwolde. "How pleased I am to see you again ! And these," she said, looking first at Archie and then at Maud, "can these be the children that used to romp with Elwood?"

"We are, my Lady," answered Lady Maud, with a smile, as she arose and met Lady Thoresby, holding up her face to receive the kiss of greeting. "Have we grown much?"

Lady Thoresby laughed a sweet, silvery laugh.

"You have at least grown handsome," she replied.

"It is not our fault, Lady Thoresby, I assure you," said Lord Dancourt, soberly, as he shook the small gloved hand held out to him.

"Ah, but I see now that you are the same boy that used to frighten all my pea-fowls off the terrace at

Floradene, and tie tin cans to my poor old white cat's tail," said Lady Thoresby, gayly, as she looked into Archie's laughing eyes. "Valerie," turning to the young lady at her side, "I beg your pardon ; I had almost forgotten you. This is Lord Dancourt, Lady Southwolde, and Lady Maud ; this is my husband's niece, Miss Thoresby."

"I fear that Miss Thoresby will not understand that I have outgrown my bad traits of character," said Lord Dancourt, when the introduction had been acknowledged.

"He is still perverse, I assure you," declared the Countess, laughing. "I shall not help to impress Miss Thoresby falsely."

But Lord Dancourt, in nowise daunted, led the young lady over to a seat and took sole possession of her, forgetting even to ask about Lord Charleroy.

Not so with Lady Maud.

From the time Lady Thoresby had spoken, she had been eagerly awaiting to hear something of Lord Charleroy ; for she felt sure that this visit meant something in regard to him. Yet she knew that she was to be disappointed. Something seemed to tell her that the master of Floradene had not come. Lady Thoresby, however, appeared to be in no hurry to mention her brother, and Lady Maud was compelled to join in the gay chatter, although her heart was somehow heavy and her mind was anywhere but here. She was in such a mood that she was quite certain that neither of the visitors would be very much impressed with her—and this was Lord Charleroy's sister, too. More than once, Lady Maud's eyes turned to the lovely, piquant face of Valerie Thoresby, noting the beauty

of its rich coloring, her dark eyes, and curly brown hair ; and wondering how long she would remain at Floradene, and if Lord Charleroy had seen her, and, if so, was it possible for him not to have fallen in love with her.

At last, Lady Southwold asked the question that her daughter had so impatiently waited to hear.

“What brought you to Floradene, Lady Thoresby?”

“Why, I fully expected to meet my brother here,” was the reply. “He wrote me that he would return to Floradene on the 25th, and I reached there yesterday. Lord Thoresby could not well leave home at the time, so I brought Valerie along with me ; but what was my disappointment this morning on receiving a message from Lord Charleroy saying that he was delayed and could not reach here for perhaps several days yet. I am exceedingly angry with him.”

“It must indeed have been disappointing to you,” said the Countess, without the least apparent concern.

“But you will wait for him, will you not?”

“Oh yes, I suppose we will spend some time at Floradene ; and Lord Thoresby, too, will come down in a short time. Elwood bade me in his message to come to Merivale at once and inform Archie also that he had been delayed. I suppose by that you must have known of his coming,” she said, looking directly at Lady Maud.

“Yes, we had heard that he intended to return,” the latter replied carelessly.

“I must admit that Elwood has disappointed me in some respects,” said Lady Thoresby, candidly, when she rose to go ; “he has been more reckless than is usual for the Charleroy, but, nevertheless, Maud, I

will send him as soon as he comes and let you judge him, hoping at the same time that you will give him a good round lecture."

Lady Maud smiled coldly—not so much on Lady Thoresby as on the thoughts of Lord Charleroy, for never had she been so near to condemning him before. Even Miss Thoresby, who had been near enough to hear the remark, noticed that Lady Maud made no reply to it ; and when they had taken their leave, she said to her aunt :

" Lady Maud Dancourt is a very proud girl, I think. Do you believe she and Lord Charleroy will like each other ?"

Lady Thoresby turned upon her in surprise.

" Why of course they will like each other," she replied with slight indignation. " They were the best of childhood friends ; and indeed there is no reason why Maud Dancourt should feel too proud for a Charleroy. You must remember, Valerie, that in all Europe there is not a better name."

But though Miss Thoresby was silent, she had her own opinion ; and perhaps my lady herself would have been less certain of her brother's future if she had seen Lady Maud that night when alone in her room—how she wept tears of anger and wounded pride, saying that when Lord Charleroy came to Merivale, if he ever did, she would tell him that she was not foolish enough to expect him to fulfil their childhood betrothal ; that he was free to love and wed whom he would.

CHAPTER VII.

“RESPECTFULLY DECLINED.”

THE Earl of Southwolde was too much absorbed in his own troubles to think much of Lord Charleroy, or care whether he ever returned to Floradene or not; but perhaps in his secret heart he did regret his promise to Basil Charleroy, since Lady Maud's marriage now would avail him nothing unless she married well. He would doubtless have been relieved if he had been certain that the master of Floradene would never come to Merivale or expect to claim his daughter for his wife; but he worried himself with these thoughts as little as possible, saying that the time was yet far distant and he could only wait and see what the future would bring forth.

He spoke but little of his misfortune, for everything seemed already to have been said; but although he saw no rest by night or day, there was yet a faint hope in his heart.

He had sent a long, beseeching letter, full of kindness, to the daughter of his dead sister, Lady Adalene, urging her to come to Merivale in her loneliness and grief, and assuring her of a welcome; and, with an eagerness that no one but himself could understand, he waited for the answer.

Even the Countess, who prided herself on her quick perception, knew not the depth of the Earl's motive in inviting Renzo Alvarez's heiress to Merivale.

It was true that some feeling of duty had perhaps

prompted him to the act—he saw a way at last by which he could atone in a measure for his wrongs to the dead; yet indeed his own interest was the subject of his planning.

As soon as he had received Mr. Lawton's letter saying that Renzo Alvarez's heiress, a young girl of eighteen, survived him, a thought, which had never before struck him, came into his mind.

If Archie, Lord Dancourt, could only meet this girl and marry her, they would be saved. Their ruin could be averted. Would it not be a fair compact?

Archie would some day be Earl of Southwolde, and the right to such a name—to be countess of such a grand estate—would certainly be something for Renzo Alvarez's heiress, even though she gave her money in exchange for it. She was so immensely wealthy that she would never miss the amount that had been loaned on Southwolde, and it would only be a severe lesson to the Earl after all.

Indeed, it seemed to Lord Southwolde that nothing could be a greater blessing than for these two to meet and wed; although under different circumstances he might have chosen others in preference to Miss Alvarez for his son's wife.

He said nothing of his desire to the Countess, for he feared she would oppose it; and it would be time enough to let her know, he thought, when he was more certain that the hope was not a vain one.

Lord Dancourt's words in the girl's favor, and his willingness to invite her to Merivale, had encouraged the Earl greatly. He felt that heaven must surely be aiding him and showing him a way out of his trouble.

"If I do not save myself by this means, I am lost,"

he said ; and his suspense became greater as the time approached for him to receive an answer to the letter which it seemed to him was to decide his fate.

The Countess too was interested, and watched the Earl eagerly each morning as he opened his mail, but not for worlds would she have allowed it to be known that she was anything but indifferent. Several times Archie inquired if Miss Alvarez had yet been heard from, but Lady Maud was silent and seemed to be deaf to the very name. It was hard for her to forget that her father had sent the invitation bitterly against her wishes ; and perhaps this caused her to dislike Renzo Alvarez's daughter even more, and she secretly hoped that the girl would not so much as answer the Earl's letter.

She began to think that this would be the case, when one morning her eyes chanced to fall on a small, square, mourning envelope lying on the top of Lord Southwolde's other mail at the side of his plate ; and as he snatched it up eagerly and hastily broke the seal, she knew instinctively that this must be Miss Alvarez's letter.

There was a long-drawn breath from the Countess and a suppressed gasp from the Earl as he read, and Archie, looking up quickly and seeing the look of distress on his father's face, knew that the reply was not as he would have it.

"Have you heard from the girl at last?" he asked quickly.

"Yes," the Earl replied in a terse voice ; "but she declines my invitation to Merivale. Hear what she says :

“LORD SOUTHWOLDE : I have no desire to visit you and your family at Merivale. Your kind invitation, which I this moment watch with a smile of contempt as it burns to ashes in the grate, over the heat of glowing coals that are no hotter than my hatred for the Dancourts, is respectfully declined.

“IZMA ALVAREZ.”

For a moment after the Earl had finished reading and looked up, there was dead silence; and then Lord Dancourt laughed—he could not help it, his mother’s face was so full of indignation, and Lady Maud seemed fairly stricken dumb with astonishment. He cleared his throat dryly, looked up at the Earl, who had grown quite pale, endeavored to restrain his amusement, but, failing, burst into a peal of hearty laughter that seemed to arouse those around him from the stupor into which they had fallen.

“By George!” he exclaimed; “it is brief but to the point, I’ll declare. What a vixen Miss Alvarez must be! I suppose that cuts our hoped-for friendship.”

“It is well for our safety that she does not come,” said Lady Maud, smiling in spite of herself. “I should after this be quite afraid of her.”

“The upstart!” exclaimed the Countess, indignantly. “I never heard of such insolence. She might at least have made polite reply. I suppose you see now, Robert,”—severely,—“that blood will tell.”

The Earl groaned inwardly with despair; but he endeavored to keep his composure as well as possible.

“We can do no more,” he said in a voice that was strangely husky, and giving Lady Southwolde a look

that caused her to shudder ; for she knew what he meant. Her anger cooled and her heart died within her. In an instant it flashed across her mind that there could be no hope for them from Izma Alvarez.

Lady Maud looked up at the Earl's pale face.

"You seem to attach a good deal of importance to this girl's letter, father," she said. "Indeed, I should not give her a thought. You have done your duty, and offered her your friendship. You cannot do more."

"No, no, my dear, you are mistaken," he replied with a mirthless laugh, folding the letter and putting it away in his pocket, without being conscious of the action. "I assure you it does not trouble me, yet, I—I rather expected a different reply."

"Of course you did," said Lady Maud, pitying his agitation, though she knew not why, and feeling angry towards Miss Alvarez. "I firmly believed, myself, that she would accept the invitation ; and I certainly did not think of such an answer as this, even though I was sure in the beginning that I would not like her."

"I would have thought that she would at least have shown her appreciation," declared the Earl, wishing to say something and knowing not what else to say.

"Miss Alvarez does not seem to be of the appreciative mind," said Archie, who would like to have added that he admired her for her independence ; but dreading the reproof that would follow such a remark, he thought the same in silence.

"It is no more than we ought to have expected," said Lady Maud. "As for my part, it is known, of course, that I am not sorry she has declined the invitation, yet I must admit that I regret having given her

the pleasure of such an insolent refusal. Oh, dear, how I would like to send a reply to that letter!"

"But you must not!" forbade the Earl, quickly. "Be sure that you do nothing so rash, Maud."

"I do not mean to, yet I assure you I would like it. I think, however, that you and mother both are unreasonably affected by Izma Alvarez's letter. Mother looks positively downcast. We have lived too long a time without the girl to begin to worry ourselves about her this late in the day."

"Perhaps that is the very thing Izma—isn't that a pretty name?—the very thing she thought when she wrote that letter," said Lord Dancourt, wisely.

But this remark was intentionally unnoticed.

"I am affected by the letter, my dear, simply through anger, if you must have the truth," said the Countess, with forced calmness. "It is seldom that I have ever been compelled to bear such an insult as this girl has given us."

"And it was so unlooked for," observed Archie, mildly. "No one expected, of course, that Miss Alvarez would have any resentment."

"We shall certainly remember it against her," declared Lady Maud, with a withering look upon Lord Dancourt.

"We will, most assuredly we will," the latter assented agreeably, "yet at the same time admitting that it will not shorten Miss Alvarez's life."

"The best thing to do is to banish it from our minds, as it is of no consequence," said the Earl, as he arose and left the room. But Lady Maud, more than Archie, was not satisfied. She could not understand

the pallor of her father's face, nor the look of agony that she had seen for a moment in her mother's eyes.

The Countess followed her husband from the room ; and a strange desire to hear what they would say to each other when alone, was strong upon Lady Maud. But no thought of endeavoring to do so came to her mind ; for though she had been spoiled, and had her faults, she still had a high sense of honor.

But when the Earl and Countess had gone out, she turned to her brother and said :

"Somehow this thing has puzzled me, Archie. There seems to be something behind all this. What do you think of it?"

"Why, I think it is something unusual for my lord and lady to have their invitations flung back in their faces as Miss Alvarez has flung it ; that's all," replied Lord Dancourt, with a laugh, never dreaming how serious the case was.

But still Lady Maud was not convinced ; and in after-days, when she understood her misgivings, this very morning came back to her mind.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNTIMELY MEETING.

"MAUD, do come."

"No, I won't."

"Please."

"I refuse."

"Oh, why was you born so stubborn? Look out

the window! I've had both our horses saddled, I was so sure you would consent to go. It's all nonsense about Lord Charleroy. *He* is not at Floradene, and we are going to see Lady Thoresby and her niece. Somebody ought to return their visit. Now run along—there's a good girl—and get on your habit."

The scene was in Lady Southwolde's pretty morning-room, the day after Izma Alvarez's letter had been received at Merivale, and Lord Dancourt was using all his powers of persuasion upon Lady Maud to accompany him over to Floradene.

"It is such a fine morning for exercise," he continued coaxingly; "and what's the use of being formal with such old friends and near neighbors as these? Are you coming?"

"I think not," replied Lady Maud, with provoking unconcern, as she continued to ply herself to the bit of fancy-work she held in her white hands.

"Oh, you *think* not. Why don't you know? If I was a girl, I'm certain I wouldn't let a man like Lord Charleroy—and he miles and miles away from here too—keep *me* away from Floradene."

"It is not that, but—"

"Yes, it is; that's just what is it."

"But, Archie—"

"Oh, you can't fool me. You're mad because Lord Charleroy hasn't come to Merivale yet, and you won't go to Floradene. Pshaw! I wouldn't let people think I cared."

"I don't," declared Lady Maud, indignantly, snapping the threads of her dainty work and flinging it impatiently from her. "You don't know what you are talking about, Archie Dancourt."

"I do, my dear," more tenderly. "I am trying to persuade you to go to Floradene."

"But it is going to rain," persisted Lady Maud, weakly, rising and looking out the window and up at the clouds.

"If it doesn't, we will have a famine."

"I mean now."

"This minute?"

"Archie, you are provoking. This morning."

"Provoking this morning? That hasn't anything to do with the rain."

"I shall not go to Floradene; that's all," declared Lady Maud, in an exasperated tone.

"Oh, you must; you have almost consented," said Lord Dancourt, catching her by the hands and laughing at her vexation. "Come! I promise never to tease you again."

And in spite of Lady Maud's protestations, he drew her toward the door and out into the hall, pointing toward the stairway.

"Go!" he commanded in anything but a tone of sternness, "and see that you are ready in ten minutes. I shall wait for you below."

"If we *must* go, why not go in the carriage?" she asked, not wishing to give in too easily. "They will hardly look for such an informal call, I fancy."

"Then, we will surprise them. I like informality; and I think Miss Thoresby does, too."

"Ah, then it is to please Miss Thoresby."

"No, it isn't. It is to please myself. Now go!"

"But Archie," hesitatingly.

"Well, what else is it?"

"Don't you think Lord Charleroy will fall in love with Valerie Thoresby?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"No, of course you don't," admitted Lady Maud, with a nervous little laugh, moving toward the stairway. "It was a foolish question."

"If you are going, do hurry, Maud," said Lord Dancourt, growing impatient.

But Lady Maud paused again on the second step.

"Yes, I'm going," she replied, looking back; "but—but, Archie, do you think it possible for *any* man not to fall in love with Miss Thoresby?"

"Certainly. *I* am not in love with her—that's one."

Lady Maud ascended a few more steps, but she did not seem satisfied. Suddenly she turned again.

"Archie!"

"Well, good heavens, Maud! Will you never get up the stairway?"

"Then you think it possible that Lord Charleroy will not fall in love with Valerie Thoresby," she said desperately.

"Yes, yes! I am quite sure he will hate her!" cried Lord Dancourt, who would have said the same at that moment if he had known the two to be betrothed.

"Very well, then; I shall be ready in five minutes," she said, laughing, and running up stairs and out of sight.

Archie drew a long breath of relief, and, turning, made his way out to where the horses stood in readiness.

He had to wait but a few moments before Lady Maud, who seemed determined to keep her word in this instance, reappeared before him, looking very

handsome in her dark blue habit, that showed the graceful lines and curves of her symmetrical figure to perfection. Her fair, high-bred face, too, never looked better than when beneath the drooping plumes of her riding-hat, which it was her particular taste to wear.

Archie greeted her with a smile of satisfaction, and lifted her into the saddle, and soon they were galloping away from Merivale.

But Lady Maud seemed ill at ease. Now and then she would look up at the clouds, which had indeed grown very dark and threatening, and say :

“ You will see that I was not far wrong, Archie ;” or, “ I tell you we will be caught in the storm that is approaching. We were very unwise to come. Let us turn back.”

But Lord Dancourt declared that the rain was yet far off, and that they would have plenty of time to reach Floradene ; and really believing that it would be so, he would not hear to turning back.

It was no wonder, then, that when they were but little more than half way to Floradene and the rain began to pour down upon them in torrents, drenching them to the skin, and almost blinding them, Lady Maud was angry with Lord Dancourt, and herself also, for having listened to him and allowing herself to be overpersuaded.

She would have turned back then alone, but it would not benefit her, as they were nearer Floradene now than they were Merivale, and she might as well ride onward.

They were almost in sight of their destination, however, before the shower subsided, and Lady Maud,

who had hitherto been too angry to reply when Archie spoke to her, could remain silent no longer.

“So this is the result of your sound judgment of the weather, is it, Lord Dancourt?” she said sarcastically. “If there’s anything you can foresee better than you can a storm in the heavens, I would like for you to let me know.”

He smiled provokingly, and, taking off his hat, shook the water from the brim, but made no reply.

“We will present a sorry figure indeed before Lady Thoresby and her charming niece,” she continued, giving her horse a vicious cut with the whip in her hand.

Archie turned and looked at her, then broke into a loud laugh.

“You *don’t* look well,” he said. “By Jove! Maud, where are your feathers?”

“Perhaps if you could see yourself, you would have no hopes of Miss Thoresby,” she replied, her anger increasing.

“But, my dear, your hat has positively gone to nothing,” he said, still laughing, and not suffering the least loss of his temper.

“It is the last time—the very *last*—that I shall ever come with you,” she declared vehemently; “so it is well for you to make the best of it.”

“But, Maud, dear—”

“Don’t *speak* to me!” she stormed, actual tears of vexation standing in her beautiful blue eyes. And when they reached Floradene, she refused to allow him to even lift her from her saddle.

It had been a long time since she had entered these lovely grounds, which were unusually beautiful at

this season of the year, when the very atmosphere was sweet with the breath of flowers, that grew in all parts of Floradene, in every color and form ; but Lady Maud was too angry to look around her. She made her way straight toward the steps of the long, wide balcony at the south side of the great old-fashioned house, upon which a row of tall French windows opened, leaving Archie to follow her.

This he did, smiling at the indignant girl's haughty step and the way in which her damp habit clung to her.

"Aren't you going to the front of the house?" he asked her when he had reached her side.

"No," she replied curtly. "I saw Lady Thoresby through one of those windows a moment ago, and since you are so desirous of making an informal call, we might just as well enter unceremoniously. I remember this is the old sitting-room here." And she moved toward one of the windows at the right of her.

"Is that where you saw Lady Thoresby?"

"I'm not sure, but I think so."

"I say, Maud, are you very angry?"

"Yes."

"And you are sorry you came?"

They had now reached the window, and Lady Maud had her hand on the curtain in the act of pushing it aside. She paused.

"Yes, I am sorry," she replied in a lowered tone. "I did not want to come to Floradene in the beginning, because I have made up my mind to dislike its master and all belonging to him. He must be a very poor excuse for a man, although I believed at first that I might be mistaken."

Now, Lady Maud would never have said this except in an angry moment like this, for she hardly meant it; and at any other time she would have been more cautious. She would have recalled it even then if it had been possible; for the very instant she had taken a step into the room, the tall form of a man arose from the depths of a cushioned chair at the very side of the window and looked at her with an odd smile.

She drew back with a startled gasp, her heart fluttering wildly. Surely there was something familiar in his dark, handsome face. Somewhere those black eyes seemed to have looked at her before. When and where was it?

All this flashed through her mind in an instant—before either of them had had time to speak; and then Lord Dancourt followed her through the window and stopped abruptly, in confused astonishment.

“How d’y’do, Dancourt?” said the gentleman, coolly, holding out his hand to Archie, with that same peculiar smile on his moustached lips.

“*Lord Charleroy!*” exclaimed Archie, when he could recover his breath; and at the sound of that name at this luckless moment, Lady Maud could feel her face flushing crimson, for she knew he had heard every word she said as she paused there at the window before entering the room. How she longed for the floor to open and swallow her up! She looked toward the window wistfully. Gladly would she have escaped through it, but it was too late to turn back now.

“You seem surprised to see me,” said Lord Charleroy, as he shook Lord Dancourt’s hand.

“I—I was hardly expecting you,” Archie replied

stammeringly, feeling like a culprit for Lady Maud's sake. "When did you arrive?"

"Only this morning. But you are pleased to see me, I hope."

"Yes, very pleased—very pleased," replied Archie, with a comical look at Lady Maud that at any other time would have brought from her lips a burst of laughter.

At this moment, however, she was anything but amused; and as Lord Charleroy turned his eyes upon her again with a curious twinkle in their depths, she thought he was looking at her dilapidated hat and rain-drenched figure, and the crimson in her cheeks grew deeper.

"I presume you remember my sister, Lady Maud," said Archie. But when the master of Floradene held out his hand to her, she was inclined not to take it, she was so displeased with the situation—everything and everybody, herself included.

"Indeed I could not easily forget her," he replied gallantly, without seeming to notice the hesitation with which she gave him her hand; "yet she has changed somewhat, I think, since childhood."

Lady Maud remembered her brother's unflattering remarks concerning her appearance, and readily mistook the well-meant compliment, feeling sure that, as she now looked, he could not think she had changed for the better.

"I should never have known you—never," she replied with dignity.

"Indeed! Then I too have changed greatly?"

"I hardly know," she said calmly. "It has been

so long since you were at Floradene, that I do not remember you."

"Ah! I flattered myself you would," he said in an unruffled tone. "Did I expect too much?"

"Yes—considering your preference for new friends and foreign countries," Lady Maud replied coolly. "Did Lady Thoresby recognize you?" raising her eyes to his face innocently.

"I believe she did; at least, I hope so, as she rushed into my arms," he said, with a smile that made Lady Maud feel slightly uncomfortable.

"Lady Thoresby and her niece are at home, are they not?" asked Archie. "We are hardly in a plight to see them; but as we are here, we will stop until the rain is over."

"By all means. Pray be seated! I am indeed sorry that you were caught in the storm, but glad that you came here for shelter," said Lord Charleroy, placing a chair for Lady Maud. "Here comes Rita and Miss Thoresby now,"—as the door opened.

Lady Maud advanced to meet the two ladies, without noticing the chair my lord had proffered her; and after this she gave him but little chance of talking to her. She tried to make herself agreeable to Lady Thoresby, but felt all the while that she was failing; for it was with an effort that she kept back the tears of disappointment and vexation from her eyes.

How different was this from the meeting with Lord Charleroy that she had always pictured in her mind! In Lord Charleroy himself she could not say that she was disappointed. Although not the handsomest man she had ever seen, there was something about his dark face wonderfully attractive. His brows, and hair, and

the drooping moustache, that did not quite conceal the faint lines of dissipation about his mouth, were jet black, and his eyes, though at times seeming to mock you, were full of an intelligent light. He was tall, too. Lady Maud had noticed, when he drew his straight figure erect, that she felt quite small beside him. She was glad of this, in spite of the fact that she had "made up her mind to dislike him," and to tell him that she did not consider herself bound to him, as soon as he came home.

But to think that after all these years, when Lord Charleroy had wilfully absented himself and seemed in no hurry whatever to renew his acquaintance with his future bride, that she should reverse the order of things and come to Floradene and meet him here !

It seemed more than the proud spirit of Lady Maud Dancourt could bear. She didn't know whether to be glad or sorry that he had heard what she said about him ; but she was quite sure that for some reason she was angry with him, and determined to let him see that, though she was at Floradene, it was not to see *him*.

And every time she looked at her damp habit and thought of her *hat*, her vexation increased, until at length, after a very short stay, and before the rain had fairly ceased, she arose and declared that she must take her departure.

Lord Dancourt made no objection, for he knew that already it would be a month at least before he could re-establish himself in Lady Maud's good graces.

Lady Thoresby and her pretty niece regretted very much that they would not remain longer, and Lord Charleroy followed Lady Maud out to her horse, and

though she did it reluctantly, she was compelled to allow him to lift her into the saddle.

He seemed determined to overlook her coldness to him ; and as they were about to part, he caught the rein and held her horse back for a moment, saying :

“ Can I come to Merivale, Lady Maud ? I was just starting this morning when it began to rain.”

“ Were you not coming, then, without permission ?” she asked deliberately, with a slight uplifting of her brows.

“ Ye-es,” he hesitated ; “ but I was thinking of you then as a child, and presuming on the old friendship. I forgot that years had made of you a woman, you know, and that you might have learned to *dislike* me while I was gone.”

Lady Maud took no heed of this little thrust.

“ But, my lord, you would surely not stay away from Merivale on *my* account !” she exclaimed in mild surprise.

“ I certainly would like to know that my coming is agreeable to you,” he replied.

“ Then I should be pleased to see you, of course—for—for mother’s sake,” she added, as if fearing that she was relenting too much. “ She was so fond of *your* mother that I dare say she would be very much hurt if you did not come to Merivale. And Archie too—”

“ So you would not be pleased for your own sake,” he interrupted impatiently, dropping the reins as if satisfied.

“ How persistent you are, Lord Charleroy !” she said with a nervous little laugh. “ One would think that you were really desirous of coming to Merivale.”

“ So I am. Do you not think so ?”

"No," she replied candidly, "of course I do not."

"Why, Lady Maud? Will you tell me?"

"No, I think not; at least, not at present."

"Don't you think you are liable to be mistaken?"

"Perhaps so; yet we will not discuss it."

"Then you do not want me to come to Merivale, so far as you are concerned," he said with a touch of *hauteur* to his tone, as he started to turn away.

But it suddenly dawned upon Lady Maud that she was not desirous of entirely losing Lord Charleroy's friendship; and she laid her hand lightly on his sleeve, detaining him, and saying with a gracious but condescending air:

"Well, come over if you like. I promise that you shall not be unwelcome." Then she smiled upon him for the first time, and, waving her hand to Lady Thoresby and her niece, with whom Archie was taking an unwilling leave on the balcony, she jerked at her rein and galloped swiftly from the spot, leaving Lord Dancourt to hastily follow her.

CHAPTER IX.

"ONLY A FACE AT THE WINDOW."

"It was really too bad, my dear," said Lady Southwolde, with a calm smile, when Lady Maud, on her return from Floradene, burst into her mother's room with tears in her eyes, and related to her her disagreeable experience of the morning; "but I should not allow the matter to trouble me. You ought to have

known better, though, than to allow Archie to coax you out on such an uncertain day as this."

"I ought indeed," admitted Lady Maud, regretfully; "but the rain, mother, was not the worst of it. I might have forgiven that if it had not been for Lord Charleroy. Just think of my meeting him at Floradene, and in such a plight as this,"—with a look of disgust at herself in the mirror over the mantel in front of her. "It was all Archie's fault; and I shall never forget it, either."

"Do you care so much for Elwood Charleroy's opinion as that?" asked the Countess, curiously. "Tell me, Maud, what did you think of him?"

"He was handsome," confessed Lady Maud, reluctantly, twirling the riding-whip, which she still held in her hand; "yes, very handsome, I think."

"Was that all?"

"No, I am sure there was more. He was tall and—"

"But what did you think of *himself*?—as a man, I mean. Did you like him?"

"I hardly know. You see I saw so little of him, and I don't believe I talked to him very much,"—thoughtfully.

"Ah! I imagined you would,"—in surprise. "Is he not coming over?"

"He said so. I am sure he will. I told him you would be pleased to see him."

"I!" exclaimed the Countess.

Lady Maud smiled.

"Certainly. Did I do wrong?"

"My dear, I really believe you are disappointed in Lord Charleroy," said the Countess, in a puzzled tone.

Lady Maud laughed and moved toward the door.

"I am disappointed in myself," she replied. "I think I must hurry and give Lord Charleroy his freedom, to prevent him from asking me for it."

"Does he desire it?" asked the Countess, growing indignant at once.

"I am sure I don't know. Perhaps he doesn't consider himself bound. I am quite certain, however,"—with another disapproving glance at her reflection in the mirror as she paused with her hand on the door-knob—"that if I was a man of good taste, Lady Maud Dancourt would not cause my pulses to thrill this morning."

And with this she opened the door and went out, leaving Lady Southwold in perplexing doubt as to whether it was Lord Charleroy that was not pleased with Lady Maud, or Lady Maud that was not pleased with Lord Charleroy.

She would not have been sorry, however, if she had known either to be the case; for only the day before, when the Earl of Southwold had received Izma Alvarez's letter, he had said to her:

"There is no hope for us, Lura. I now begin to see that even our children cannot save us. Maud may meet Lord Charleroy, and they may like each other, but this will benefit us nothing; and besides, even *he* may not be eager to wed her when the truth is known to him."

Lady Southwold studied a long time before replying, then she had looked up with an expression of desperate resolve on her face, saying:

"I cannot give up hope just yet. We know not what may happen. Wait a while, Robert, before you have despaired, and—and I will try to help you."

"You, my wife?" he exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes, why not?" she asked.

"What can *you* do?"

"I cannot say at present; but, woman though I am, I may be able to accomplish something. Do not think too little of my ability; for I tell you, Robert," she said, with a determined look in her eyes, "I would resort to almost any means to avert our impending ruin."

And she meant what she she said. Willingly would she have surmounted all obstacles, regardless of her own happiness and others, to save the world from knowing their embarrassment.

And the idea of helping the Earl in his trouble having once come to her, she thought over it much; and although at times she despaired of succeeding, she became more and more resolute in her resolve.

One thing she had decided upon—Lady Maud and Lord Charleroy must not marry.

She had much hope, however, of this being as she desired, after their unfavorable meeting at Floradene. She felt that they would not fall in love with each other now, as on their first meeting both had seemed badly impressed with each other.

At least, this is what she concluded from Lady Maud's own words.

But she was rather displeased at Lord Charleroy's promptness in coming to Merivale the very morning following that upon which Lady Maud and Archie had visited Floradene.

Archie too was away, having gone on his usual early canter through the Merivale woods, and not yet returned; and Lady Maud, who was looking much

fairer than the Countess would have liked for this occasion, was compelled to receive him. They were not allowed to remain alone together long, however. Lady Southwolde soon made her appearance in the drawing-room ; and though the Earl entered and welcomed the son of his boyhood friend, and went out again, my lady made it convenient to remain in her seat until Lord Charleroy had departed.

Lady Maud might have been vexed, but she made no sign of it. Lord Charleroy was certainly disappointed ; for as he was taking his leave, he bent over the slim white hand that he held for a moment in his own, and said :

“ I may come again, may I not, Lady Maud ? It seems that I have scarcely spoken to you yet.”

There was a double meaning in his words, and perhaps Lady Maud understood it ; for she smiled and answered with wonderful kindness :

“ You should not ask permission to come to Merivale, Lord Charleroy. Remember that it is an old friend to Floradene and all its masters. You are no less welcome here than the rest.”

But Lady Maud noticed that her mother's invitation to Lord Charleroy might have been more cordial ; and when they were alone together in the Countess's morning-room, she said to her :

“ Mother, did you not desire Lord Charleroy to come to Merivale ?”

“ Did I not tell him so ?” was the stiff reply.

“ Yes—you did ; but I think it was about in the same tone of voice that you spoke then,” said Lady Maud, with a slight smile. “ You are no better pleased with him, I presume, than before you saw him.”

"Not so well, I must confess. I could see by his face that he is a very dissipated man."

Lady Maud shrugged her graceful shoulders.

"Perhaps I am ignorant on such matters," she said ; "but indeed I saw no more of the kind in Lord Charleroy's face than in any other man's."

"I think you are wilfully blind, Maud. Your father, whom, I dare say, is a better judge than either of us, will tell you the very same that I have about Lord Charleroy."

"That he is a dissipated man?"

"Yes."

"Has he said so?"

"No ; but I am sure he will."

"Then I shall ask him," said Lady Maud, with a resolute air, as she arose from her seat and tapped the small bell on the table.

In a moment the footman appeared.

"John, if father is not busy, tell him that I wish to see him here," she commanded.

The man obeyed, and Lady Southwolde looked at her daughter in surprise.

"You seem rather in earnest," she said quietly.

"I am. Why not settle the question at once?"

"Will your father's opinion convince you?"

"It must, I suppose," unwillingly.

The Countess looked hopeful, and smiled to herself as the Earl entered the room.

Lady Maud approaches him with suppressed eagerness, and lays one hand upon his arm.

"Father," she says, "you have seen Lord Charleroy. Now tell me, do you think him a bad man?"

"Is this why you sent for me?"

“It is.”

The Earl smiled, but he was hardly pleased at this interest his daughter was taking in Lord Charleroy.

“I should say that Elwood was not a bad man, my dear,” he replied, “but one of bad habits.”

“Ah! did I not tell you so?” the Countess chimed in triumphantly. “I am not easily deceived.”

Lady Maud would not have admitted it even to herself, but the Earl’s reply had greatly disappointed her. She was sure that he would speak in Lord Charleroy’s favor. She was too proud, however, to show that her father’s opinion distressed her.

“It is too bad,” she said, laughing, “yet I believe mother is positively glad that it is so, in order to triumph over me.”

“Are you convinced?” asked the Countess.

“Quite convinced,” replied Lady Maud. And her tone was so careless and indifferent that Lady Southwolde decided that she was not much interested in Elwood Charleroy, after all.

“I am quite sure,” said the Earl, meaningly, “that Charleroy is not the man to make a proud girl happy. I believed that he would be like his father, but I see he is not; so, as things have turned out, I would advise you, Maud, not to allow the contract between myself and Basil Charleroy to influence you.”

“Father!” exclaimed Lady Maud, in surprise; for it was the first time he had ever spoken to her thus in regard to her childhood betrothal. She had believed that he at least would be pleased to see her Lady Charleroy. “But what of your promise?”

“Lord Charleroy will expect you to use your own discretion in fulfilling it—” he replied.

"If he even remembers it," said the Countess.

"Yes, if he even remembers it—which it is hardly likely that he does," agreed Lady Maud, crossing the room and seating herself at the window. "There is no need to make a fuss about Lord Charleroy. I am indeed tired of hearing his name. I am sorry, father, that I trouble you."

"No trouble, my dear, I assure—"

A knock on the door interrupted him.

"Come in!" the Countess called, and the door was flung open.

"It's only me," said Lord Dancourt, who stood on the threshold, with his hat on his head and his riding-whip in his hand; "but I heard voices, and was afraid to come in without announcing myself."

"Where have you been?" asked the Earl, looking at his flushed face and glowing eyes.

"He certainly seems excited," remarked Lady Maud, with a slight sneer, as she glanced up at his hat, which he had forgotten to remove. (She had not yet forgiven him for that visit to Floradene.)

"Excited! Well, by Jove, Maud Dancourt, if you had seen what I have this morning you would be excited too!" Archie exclaimed, jerking off his hat and flinging it down upon the table. "Do you remember the old mansion called Lane Park, five miles the other side of Floradene, father?"

"Yes—the country seat of Sir George Reimer's widow until her death," replied the Earl, wonderingly.

"Well, you know it hasn't been inhabited since I was a boy," Archie continued in breathless haste;

“but this morning I rode past there, and I saw that it had been put in thorough repair.”

“Is that all?” asked Lady Maud, in disgust, as her brother paused an instant.

“Certainly not. You must be in a hurry. The rest is the part that agitates me,” he said, with a brief laugh. “Seeing the improvements on the place, I rode near the old mansion in order to view it closely; and as I chanced to look up at one of the upper windows I saw a picture that I will never in life forget.”

“Why, what was it, my son?” asked the Countess, eagerly. And even Lady Maud could not conceal her interest.

“It was a woman; and the fairest that God ever made,” he replied, enthusiastically. “She was leaning with both white arms upon the sill, and the flowers of the clustering vines that crept up to the window made a rich, crimson crown for her beautiful, dark head. I could see that she was dressed in sombre black, but it only added to the loveliness of this living picture; for there was brightness enough in her large, velvety eyes, and the color in her cheeks would have put to shame the roses. Oh, such eyes as they were! and such a face! full of music and poetry, and a dreamy melancholy over which an artist would go mad. I stopped my horse without knowing it, and looked at her for one brief, delightful moment, and as she looked down upon me, attracted by my gaze, I saw her start, and my heart fluttered as it never had before. How beautiful she was in that startled attitude! I could have stood there all day and watched her; but seeing that she was already astonished by my lingering stare,

I aroused myself from the trance into which the sight of her had thrown me, and, touching my hat, passed on."

"And is this—only a woman's face—the cause of your excitement?" asked Lady Maud, throwing her head back with a rippling laugh.

"How long has it been, Archie, since you raved over Valerie Thoresby?"

"Valerie Thoresby!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "She cannot be compared with this girl at Lane Park. Just wait until you have seen her, Maud, and then, I dare say, you will agree with me."

"Whom could she be?" asked the Earl, in a tone of interest.

"I cannot even imagine," Lord Dancourt replied; "yet she was too dark, I think, to be an English-woman."

"Strange," mused the Earl. "She must have recently come there, or we would have heard that Lane Park was inhabited."

"I shall certainly make it my business to solve the mystery," Archie declared briskly. "You need not smile, mother. I am terribly in earnest; and I tell you if a man ever fell in love with a woman on first sight, then I fell in love with the fair creature at Lane Park this morning."

His tone was indeed earnest and his face as serious as the Countess had ever seen it. She looked up, slightly dismayed.

"Allow prudence to govern you in all things, my son," she said. "For all you know, this girl whom you so greatly admired may be a servant at Lane Park."

“A servant! That girl a servant! O mother, you would laugh at yourself for saying it if you had seen her!” Archie exclaimed. “The daughter of a queen never had a more patrician face. But was she princess or peasant, I should not admire her less; and the honor to me would be quite as great in making her Lady Dancourt.”

CHAPTER X.

A VISIT IS PLANNED TO LANE PARK.

THE Earl and Countess both were inclined to laugh at Archie's fancy for the beautiful stranger at Lane Park, and Lady Maud too, declared that it would end in a single burst of enthusiasm, like all the rest of his former love affairs; but Lord Dancourt himself knew his own mind better than any one else perhaps, and he was quite sure that no woman had ever before so greatly interested him.

The lovely face that he had seen for but a passing moment haunted him, and after this he never failed on his morning rides to go near Lane Park in the hope of catching another glimpse of it. But it was in vain that he did so. The trailing vines and scarlet blossoms still clung to that particular window, but the face that Archie so longed to see again was never there.

Lady Maud would sometimes smile when he returned from these long rides, and ask him if he had been to see his mysterious lady-love again; and he

would reply, with an impatience that was unusual to him, "that he hadn't been to see any one."

But Lady Maud knew better than this ; and the idea of her brother being in love with a woman whom he had never seen but once, and to whom he had never spoken, rather amused her.

One day when Lord Dancourt was present, and they were seated together in the drawing-room with Lord Charleroy and Valerie Thoresby, who had ridden over to Merivale, and the subject of lovers and marriage had come up, Lady Maud laughingly remarked :

"I believe Archie has met his fate at last, and in a most romantic fashion."

"Is it possible !" exclaimed Lord Charleroy, with an evidence of great surprise. "Dancourt, I should have thought that you would let us know of this. Atone at once by telling us what fair one has claimed your fancy."

"It seems that a fellow might have a secret now and then," objected Archie, with a laugh.

"Not by any means, Lord Dancourt, when there's a woman in the case," contradicted Miss Thoresby, gayly.

"Is that for me?" asked Lady Maud, reproachfully.

"It might be for Lord Dancourt's sweetheart," replied Miss Thoresby.

"We will take it that way, at least," said Lady Maud, agreeably. "Now, Archie, give us your experience."

"Well, as I'm in for it, I might as well own up, I suppose," said he. "The truth is, I have fallen in love with a strange beauty at Lane Park."

"At Lane Park !" exclaimed Lord Charleroy, in as-

tonishment. "Why, man, you're mad! The place isn't inhabited."

"I dispute it," replied Archie, calmly. "Go near there and you will see for yourself. The most beautiful woman the sun ever shone on I saw within its walls."

"Well, perhaps I am mistaken," admitted Lord Charleroy, thoughtfully; "but I understood Rita to say that no one had lived there since Lady Reiner's death."

"So she did; I heard her say it myself," said Miss Thoresby.

"But it is probable that some one could have come there of late," said Archie. "I am quite sure that the face I saw at the window was no trick of my imagination."

"What if it was a ghost?" exclaimed Lady Maud.

"Suppose we invade the place and learn," suggested Valerie Thoresby.

"Would you like it?" asked Lord Charleroy.

"I should, I'm sure," Lord Dancourt replied readily.

"No doubt," said Lady Maud, dryly. "But what if some one really lives there—and Archie evidently believes there does: would they not think we were mad?"

"We are their neighbors, then—we can certainly call on them," Valerie asserted. "There will be nothing so strange in our going there."

"But we can use our pleasure about going in if we find that the place is inhabited," said Lord Charleroy, who did not enjoy the prospect of meeting strangers so well as he did the thoughts of the long ride to the

place at Lady Maud's side. "I would like to see Lane Park once more, even if I do not enter."

"So should I," said Lady Maud. And she was annoyed at herself at this moment for blushing, as she looked up and caught Lord Charleroy's eyes fixed upon her in a steady stare.

"Then it is decided that we shall go, is it not?" asked Lord Dancourt.

"I think we are all quite willing," replied Valerie. "How shall we go?"

"On horseback, by all means," said Archie. "Maud and I can ride over to Floradene early to-morrow morning, as it is on our way to Lane Park."

"Good. Will you come, Lady Maud?" asked Lord Charleroy.

She hesitated, because she had declared that she would never go with Archie again, but Lord Charleroy believed it was because she did not wish to come to Floradene.

"Ah! I had forgotten," he said quickly. "We can meet you this side of Floradene, if you like, Lady Maud. Those grounds do not belong to me."

Lady Maud knew that she had wounded him, but she would not let him see that she understood his meaning.

"I am sure we would not like to trespass, my lord," she answered, looking at him in innocent surprise, "but we can just as easily come to Floradene."

"Of course you can," said Miss Thoresby, astonished. "I would like to know why not."

"It was for Lady Maud's pleasure that I spoke," said Lord Charleroy, rather stiffly. "I feared—"

"Oh, pshaw! we will come, of course," interrupted

Archie, impatiently. "At least *I* will be on time for Miss Thoresby."

"Then may I hope that you will come for *me*, Lady Maud?" Lord Charleroy asked, with a smile, as he arose to take his leave, and held out his hand to her.

"That is the only course left me, it seems," she replied. "If you desire it, I will come."

"I cannot tell you how much I desire it, Lady Maud," he said earnestly, as he pressed her hand.

CHAPTER XI.

A STARTLING DISCLOSURE.

THE Countess of Southwolde had passed a very restless night; and long before it was her usual hour to rise, she had left her pillow and was sitting at the window of her boudoir, looking out upon the dew-wet grass and flowers, and thinking of her trouble, which at times seemed more than she could bear. She had thought until her brain was addled, yet she could devise no means by which it seemed possible to save themselves from ruin. The Earl was right, she began to believe—there was no hope for them. They must suffer for his folly.

"God have mercy and spare us for our children's sake!" she had prayed again and again, when all earthly hope seemed slipping from her. But even though she asked for pity, she was not a woman to

trust to heaven for aid ; and in no way did there seem any help for her.

On this morning that she sat there in her boudoir alone, her eyes fixed upon the magnificent grounds that stretched out before her, which might soon be taken from her, bitter tears coursed down her cheeks, and she thought with miserable regret how time had changed the fortunes of the Earl of Southwolde and Renzo Alvarez, the man whose poverty they had once despised.

But the Countess, though selfish in most things, would have suffered much less, perhaps, in this—the greatest trial of her life—if it had not been for the thought that sooner or later the blow of their great misfortune must fall upon Archie and Maud.

Gladly would she have borne the burden alone and shielded them from every sorrow.

Only yesterday her heart had been made to ache by their happy faces when they came to her and told her of their prospective visit to Lane Park. Their laughter was so full of the joy of youth, and their hearts were so free from every pain and care, it was no wonder that the Countess could not sleep for thinking of the time that their young lives must be blighted.

Her head was bowed and she was weeping, when the door opened softly and the Earl came into the room. She did not see him until he stopped beside her and laid his hand upon her arm.

She looked up, and there was something in his face that made her heart beat faster. She saw that he held an open letter in his hand.

“Robert!” she exclaimed quickly ; “what is it? Have you news—good news?”

"Let us hope so," he replied cheerfully; "but I thought you were braver than this, Lura. You are weeping."

"It is so hard to bear," she said sorrowfully. And the Earl bent down and dropped a pitying kiss upon her forehead.

"But we'll try not to despair just yet, my dear," he replied. "I have come to tell you what is in Mr. Lawton's letter; but you must be reasonable when you have heard what I have to say to you."

"I will," she promised eagerly. "Tell me what it is."

"It is a very surprising—I should say startling, perhaps—piece of news," he said. "Mr. Lawton informs me that Renzo Alvarez's heiress has left Spain and come to England to reside."

"Has left Spain and come to England!" echoed the Lady Southwolde, in amazement. "What does it mean?"

"That she intends to take her father's affairs in her own hands, I presume," the Earl replied calmly. "I see no other reason for it."

"But, Robert, how can this be best for us?" asked the Countess, in startled wonder.

"Perhaps it is not; yet I have my own reasons for thinking so."

"And where is the girl—in what part of England?"

"You may well ask," said the Earl, slowly. "She is at *Lane Park*."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed the Countess, in amazement. "Are you jesting, Robert?"

"I was never more serious in my life," he replied.

“There”—tossing the letter in his hand into her lap—
“is the proof of it.”

It was true. The Countess saw this as she read. Miss Alvarez had come to England, and was living at Lane Park, only a few miles from Merivale. There was no mistake, for it was plainly written in Mr. Lawton's letter.

Lady Southwolde looked up with a startled expression on her pale face, saying :

“This girl that Archie saw at Lane Park—”

“Must have been Izma Alvarez,” the Earl finished.

The Countess rose hurriedly to her feet.

“Does Archie and Maud know this?” she asked excitedly.

“No.”

“Then we must tell them at once, Robert,” she said ; “for they are going to Lane Park this morning.”

She started toward the door, but the Earl placed a detaining hand upon her arm.

“Come back,” he bade her. “You would commit a most rash act, in your excitement. Archie and Maud must learn this themselves. It is not best that we should tell them.”

“Why?” asked the Countess, in surprise. “Do you intend to allow them to go to Lane Park without knowing that Izma Alvarez is there?”

“Certainly. Why not? I was going to allow *her* to come to Merivale if she had not refused.”

“That is it,” said Lady Southwolde, growing angry at the very remembrance of it. “After her insulting reply to your letter, I do not desire my children to go near her.”

“But Archie seemed to admire her very much,”

said the Earl, with an odd expression in his eyes. "I hardly think he will prove an enemy to Izma Alvarez."

The Countess started, and was silent a moment.

"You remember," Lord Southwolde continued, "he openly declared that he had fallen in love with her."

"He did not mean it," she quickly replied ; and besides, he did not dream whom she was. When he learns that it is Izma Alvarez, he will readily change his mind."

"I hope not," said the Earl deliberately.

The Countess looked at him closely.

"Lord Southwolde, what do you mean?" she cried in sudden alarm.

"Exactly what my words imply, my dear," he replied. "That I hope, if Archie is in love with Renzo Alvarez's daughter, he will remain so."

"Are you mad?" exclaimed the Countess.

"I think not. I will go mad, however, if I sit calmly by and make no effort to save Southwolde. You surely can see the wisdom in my desire, Lura. If such a thing as Archie marrying Izma Alvarez was possible, we would be saved."

The Countess sank breathless into the nearest chair.

"Heaven help us if it has come to this!" she gasped.

"I will never consent to it—never!"

"Then there is no other hope for us. I was sure you would be unreasonable. That is why I did not tell you that it was for this purpose I invited Izma Alvarez to Merivale. I felt that it would be heaven's blessing if those two should meet and wed."

The Countess sprang to her feet again, and paced the floor in an agitated manner.

"The girl is far beneath my son in everything!" she exclaimed—"in birth, in rank, and—"

"All except money," the Earl interrupted. "She is far above him in that."

"Money! I almost hate it!" she cried vehemently.

"Yet we cannot exist, you have learned, without it,"—with a calm smile.

"Oh, I had had such great hopes of Archie's future—such brilliant views for his marriage; and to think of giving him to Izma Alvarez! I cannot! He shall not be sacrificed!"

"Wait, my dear. You have gone too far. There may not be the least chance of such a thing. Even if Archie should love the girl, she might refuse him."

Lady Southwolde broke into a shrill laugh.

"Ah, my lord, you need not fear for that!" she said. "Miss Alvarez may decline to visit us at Merivale; but to be Lady Dancourt, future Countess of Southwolde, is quite another thing. You may feel safe there—quite safe. Archie has only to offer himself—take my word for it."

"I would like to feel equally as certain. I should feel much better, I assure you."

"But, tell me, is there no other way to save Southwolde?" cried the Countess, entreatingly.

"If there is, I have not yet been able to discover it. If you can find a better plan, I will most willingly consent to it," the Earl replied.

Lady Southwolde went up to him and dropped on her knees beside his chair.

"You will remember that?" she asked eagerly, grasping his arm. "If I can find another means to save Southwolde, you will consent to it."

"I will not be likely to forget it ; but I cannot put much faith in your efforts, Lura, since all my own have thus far failed," he replied, with a laugh.

"You do not know how earnest I am," she said. "I cannot sleep at night for thinking of this thing, and trying to see a way by which I can help you in your trouble."

"Then I should think that you would be eager for this marriage of which I speak."

"No, no ! Anything but that. I cannot favor such a plan, Robert. Do you think that I could consent to receive the child of Renzo Alvarez for my daughter, when I was so bitterly opposed to her being brought to Merivale even when a babe ? Oh, it must not be—I could not bear it."

"You forget that the same blood flows in Izma Alvarez's and your son's veins," said Lord Southwolde, impatiently.

"Ah, but such a little, my lord. Lady Adelene Dancourt was only your half-sister ; and her mother, I have heard you say, was not near equal to your mother in birth."

"Yet Adalene was the daughter of the Earl of Southwolde."

"And Izma is the daughter of Renzo Alvarez," said the Countess, triumphantly. "Nothing can make me think more of her, no matter what you say, Robert."

"Well, it is useless to quarrel about it yet ; but if you are wise, you will say nothing to discourage Archie's fancy for Izma Alvarez. You will be very likely to change your mind before the six months are out. My only fear is that no such good luck as this marriage that I hope for will happen to us."

CHAPTER XII.

A BAD BEGINNING.

MEANWHILE Lord Dancourt and Lady Maud had ridden over to Floradene, blissfully ignorant of what was taking place in their mother's boudoir at Merivale, and found Lord Charleroy and Miss Thoresby in readiness, awaiting their arrival. Lord Charleroy stood on the steps of the balcony, leaning carelessly against the large column at his side, and evidently watching for them as they rode, and Lady Maud could not help noticing how handsome he was as he stood there in that attitude of unconscious grace.

As they drew nearer and stopped their horses, he hurried down the steps, with a smile of welcome, and made his way to Lady Maud, to assist her to the ground; but she shook her head and returned his smile, saying that she would not dismount, as they were late already.

"Where is Miss Thoresby?" asked Archie at once, looking around him for the missing one. "Isn't she ready?"

"She is, and has been so for the last half hour, Lord Dancourt," announced Valerie herself, who emerged from the recess of the window, where she had been standing, followed by Lady Thoresby, and came towards them.

Archie saluted them by touching his hat, and, alighting, went up to where they stood.

"Am I so much behind-time?" he asked. "I thought I would give them time to have breakfast at Lane Park, you know."

"What, the ghosts!" exclaimed Lady Thoresby, in assumed astonishment.

"Lady Thoresby, some one has been imposing upon your credulity," said Archie, in an earnest tone.

"Yet I heard, from a reliable source, that you had fallen in love with a ghost at Lane Park," she declared, laughing.

"Then it was a very healthy one, I assure you."

"And very beautiful too, was it not?" said Valerie.

"Lady Thoresby has only to come with us and see for herself on that question," Lord Dancourt replied.

"No indeed ; I should be quite afraid," she refused, with pretended dismay.

"You need not, under my care, Lady Thoresby ; for it would be quite a pleasure for me to seize the ghost, if it is the one that I have seen," said Lord Dancourt, boldly.

"Go ! that is enough of you," commanded Lady Thoresby, giving him a little push toward the steps.

Archie threw his head back with a blithesome laugh, and, taking Valerie's small, gloved hand, led her out to where the horses were standing.

Lord Charleroy was already mounted ; and a handsome pair he and Lady Maud made as they sat there side by side in their saddles.

"We will allow you to take the lead, Dancourt," Lord Charleroy said, as he made room for the latter to pass him, "since you are quite accustomed to the route to Lane Park."

"But take care that you do not lag too far behind,"

bade Archie, with a smile and a wink, that went nearer the mark than he imagined. Lady Maud endeavored to look unconscious—for she felt that Lord Charleroy had turned his eyes upon her—but she would have given much to pull her brother's ears, and avenge herself.

Lady Thoresby smiled as she watched them gallop from sight, and was not displeased to see that the friendship which had begun in Lord Charleroy's and Lady Maud's childhood had stood the test of the years during which they had lived apart.

Lady Maud would not have dreamed that through her mask of pride and coldness it was possible to see the true state of her heart; yet a woman's eyes are quick to see, and Lady Thoresby was inclined to believe that her indifference to her brother was more or less assumed.

But she would not have said this to Lord Charleroy if she had had known it to be true, for she was no enemy to her sex; and "the vanity of man was great enough," she had often said, "without taking a step to increase it." So my lord was left to manage his own affairs, and discover Lady Maud's sentiments for him as best he might.

That he did wish to know whether or not she was indifferent to him, there was little doubt; but he almost feared to approach her. Never yet had he even dared so much as to ask her if she remembered their childhood betrothal. He was quite sure that it was very distinct in his own memory, yet Lady Maud was several years younger than himself; and she had been such a child when they parted that, if no one had thought to remind her of it since then, it was very

probable that she had forgotten it. The Earl of Southwolde, too, might not have thought his promise made so long ago still binding ; he might even have other views for his daughter, or he might have wilfully withheld from her the knowledge of that contract with his old friend Basil Charleroy. Perhaps now that the son of the man whom he had once so dearly loved had proven to be a wild, reckless sort of fellow, who was not at all particular whether he saved the wealth of his ancestors or spent it, Lord Southwolde looked higher for a husband for Lady Maud.

Lord Charleroy thought all this, and he had weighed it in his mind long before he returned to Floradene. For this very reason, more than any other, he had remained away from England, until all who knew him had given up the hope of his ever returning.

“I must either reform or remain away from Floradene, and give Lady Maud Dancourt the chance to love and wed another before I presume to claim of her her father’s promise,” he had said. And year after year he had declared that he would give up his folly, but it was so hard to break away from the old ties and settle down to what he termed “a quiet life.”

He was a spendthrift ; he knew it—there was no one more alive to his faults. He had lost on races and at the gaming-table ; had feasted his friends and enjoyed himself so lavishly that the support of his estate was indeed almost lain waste ; yet like the moth that flutters around the candle, he continued to scorch his wings, heedless of his own injury.

There was no one to remonstrate with him—he was entirely alone and free ; but occasionally, when he

thought of his waywardness, he would berate his own self, saying :

“I am a worthless scamp—not fit to live. I can never return to Floradene.” And then a longing for home would rush over him. He could see the old mansion where he had first beheld the light of day—where deer browsed in the park, and his sister’s petted pea-fowls strutted on the green terrace ; he could imagine himself a boy again, kneeling at his mother’s knee and repeating the prayer that she had taught him asking the Lord to make him good and forgive all his childish sins ; then he was at Merivale once more, romping with Archie Dancourt and the beautiful golden-haired girl that he had loved with all the strength of his boyish passion ; and when he awoke from his dream, he would cry out with pain, resolving to be a better man for the sake of the lesson that his dead mother had taught him in his childhood.

And the time came when there was a change in him ; and “Elwood, the generous-hearted,” as his associates had called him, refused at last to be led astray.

“I have been a fool and a dishonor to my race ; but even yet I can save myself,” he decided. “I will return to Floradene, even though my former friends despise me.”

—He did not stop to think that he had been far away from England, and that there were but few who really knew of his reckless career. Conscious of his own guilt, it seemed to him that it was an open book to others ; and the coldness with which he had been received by Lady Maud Dancourt on that well-remembered morning of his arrival at Floradene was in no wise surprising to him. He did not blame her for the

words he had heard her say. He was a "poor excuse for a man," after all, he thought; and who had a better right to call him such than her whom he had neglected?

Yet the words had wounded him more than he cared to admit; and every time he looked at Lady Maud's fair, proud face, he would think of them, and turn his eyes away impatiently, mentally calling himself a fool for even dreaming of gaining her favor. No doubt, he thought, she was already a more favored lover's betrothed wife, for she was by far too beautiful not to have had many suitors for her hand; and he felt that to ask her to fulfil the promise made by her father to his own would be an open presumption.

Yet Lady Maud was wondering all the while that he did not say something of their betrothal; and though she had made up her mind before his arrival at Floradene to tell him that he was free, she did not have the courage to say the words until Lord Charleroy had made some allusion to the subject, and she was quite sure that he thought of the matter in a serious light.

So when they found themselves alone together, there was a constraint between them which neither could understand; but on this morning, as they rode side by side on their way to Lane Park, Lady Maud was in the best of spirits, and talked and laughed with Lord Charleroy which both surprised and charmed him.

"Do you know, Lady Maud, you are like your old self to-day," he said to her, looking into her face with admiring eyes. "I thought you had changed; but I see you now as you were when a child—at the time when I left you. Have you forgotten that day?"

She would like to have said she had, but she could not be untruthful.

"No," she replied, without looking at him. "I was quite old enough to remember."

"But you would not have known me again after so many years," he said, with a touch of reproach in his voice, remembering the words she had said to him on their first meeting.

"No; one's memory cannot hold good forever, Lord Charleroy."

"True, perhaps," he admitted, with an involuntary sigh; "yet I should have known *you* anywhere. It was because, I suppose, your image was engraven more deeply on my mind. I think I remember every instance of our childhood days together, Lady Maud."

"What a broad mind you must have, my lord!" she exclaimed, with a nervous laugh. "I myself am very forgetful."

"I believe you," he said. "Had you forgotten that there ever was an Elwood Charleroy until I returned to Floradene and reminded you?"

"N—not quite; but it had been so long, you know," she hesitated.

"I would have come back to Floradene years ago, but I knew there was no one to care," he said half sadly. "There is no living being, Lady Maud, whom my movements affect."

"Your sister, Lady Thoresby," she reminded him, quickly.

"She cares for me, of course; but my mode of living, you must admit, does not affect her. I once enjoyed my freedom, but it seems to me now, since I have re-

turned to Floradene, that a man requires something more than I possess in this life."

"We cannot have everything, Lord Charleroy. We are required to be content with what is given us," she calmly replied.

"But I am not of that nature," he said, giving her clearly cut profile, which was turned persistently towards him, a scrutinizing glance.

"Few of us are," she granted; "yet the world would be better for it if there were more."

"I am not a good man, Lady Maud; therefore I do not see things in a good light."

"Nor am I a perfect woman; yet even the wicked may know good advice," she said, a smile breaking over her face as she turned her eyes slowly towards him.

"I cannot imagine you wicked, Lady Maud," he said gently.

"It is because you do not know me well," she replied.

"And I fear that you do not mean to give me the chance of knowing you better. We ought to be the best of friends."

"Well, so we are; are we not, Lord Charleroy?"

"Nay, more than friends, if we are loyal to the promise of our fathers," he was about to add impulsively, when Lord Dancourt, who was some distance ahead, shouted back to them, and bade them ride faster, as they were nearing Lane Park.

Lady Maud looked up and caught the glimpse of tall towers through the interlacing trees, and knew that her brother was speaking truthfully. They were only a short distance from Lane Park.

"Come!" she said, with a little imperious gesture to Lord Charleroy; and giving her horse a cut with her whip, she galloped up alongside of Archie and Valerie Thoresby, and my lord hastily followed her.

"Are we to attempt going inside?" asked Lady Maud, a little uneasily now that they were so near.

"We will first see if the coast is clear," replied Lord Charleroy.

"Mercy! You wouldn't turn back without entering, I hope!" exclaimed Valerie, in astonishment. "I shall go in at once, if for nothing else but to prevent Rita Thoresby from laughing at me when I return to Floradene. She will call you cowards, every one of you, and declare that you were afraid of the ghost."

"Then Dancourt must take us in and introduce us," said Lord Charleroy, laughing.

"I'll be hanged if I do!" retorted Archie. "I'm not the man that suggested for you to come to Lane Park, noway."

"Of course. I had an idea that you would weaken at the last minute," declared Miss Thoresby, scornfully. "I am disappointed in every one of you."

"Well, as you are the bravest of the party, Valerie, suppose you lead us," suggested Lady Maud, with a smile.

"Not a bad idea by any means, if you'll promise to follow," she said.

"We will—rely upon it," replied Lady Maud.

"But be sure to tell whomever you meet that we had no idea any one was living here," said Lord Charleroy, as Miss Thoresby rode on ahead of them.

Valerie made no reply, but galloped swiftly onward,

keeping the towers of Lane Park, which they had seen in the distance, in sight.

But as they drew nearer the place, Lord Dancourt saw that they had taken the wrong road to reach the main entrance. He shouted to Valerie and told her to turn to the right, but she was too far ahead of them by this time to hear the sound of his voice.

There was nothing left them but to follow ; and this they did, thinking that Miss Thoresby would stop when she saw that by this route she could not enter.

When they were near enough to view Lane Park plainly, they saw that a rude fence inclosing the rear of the place prevented their entrance into the grounds unless they leaped over it, and this they of course, had no intention of doing while they knew a convenient gateway to be on the north side.

"I wonder if Valerie doesn't see that fence," said Lord Charleroy, shading his eyes with his hand, and watching the graceful figure ahead of him as it plunged on unmindful of the obstruction before her.

"She can't be blind," replied Archie.

"She doesn't like to be outdone, and is leading us on as far as possible," said Lady Maud, laughing ; "but she will be compelled to turn back."

"And considerably crestfallen too," added Lord Charleroy, echoing her laugh, as he thought of Valerie's chagrin.

"I am not so sure about her turning back," said Archie, leaning forward excitedly in his saddle. "Look ! Good heavens !"—with a quick breath of alarm, as Miss Thoresby urged her horse onward—"I believe she is going to leap the fence !"

“Impossible!” exclaimed Lord Charleroy, paling at the thought. “She would not be so rash.”

“I wouldn’t swear to it,” said Archie, breathlessly, as Valerie drew nearer and nearer to the fence and her horse did not slacken.

“Valerie! Valerie! turn back!” called Lord Charleroy, loudly, becoming alarmed. “Lightfoot cannot make it!”

But if Miss Thoresby heard, she took no heed. She reached the fence, her horse reared and plunged forward, there was a leap into the air, and then—just what the horrified lookers-on had expected took place. The horse missed his footing and fell to the other side, bearing his luckless rider with him to the ground.

CHAPTER XIII.

IZMA AND LADY MAUD.

It was a thrilling moment for the three that had witnessed the disaster. A cry of horror burst simultaneously from their lips, as they saw Valerie flung precipitately over the horse’s neck, and fall several feet distant, directly against a small summer-house, which was thickly covered with rose-vines, and lie there still and motionless.

Breathless with haste and fright, they dashed toward the spot, but before it was possible for them to reach it, a slender, black-robed figure had hurried

through the door of the little rose-arbor and was kneeling there on the ground at Valerie's side.

Lord Dancourt was the first to reach the fence ; and as he dismounted his horse and leaped over the rugged railings, he saw that the graceful creature who had suddenly come upon the scene was the same beautiful young girl that he had seen at an upper window of the house, and whose rare loveliness had so captivated his fancy.

Her face was now shaded by a large ; black sun-hat and as she sprung up, startled by his nearness, and turned her dark, liquid eyes upon him, she looked so much like a child that Archie was astonished. Yet he felt his heart-beats quicken as he approached her.

"I beg your pardon," he said, lifting his hat as she drew back from him half timidly ; "but the intrusion is unavoidable."

"Yes," she replied in a voice that was as sweet as the chiming of silver bells, as she looked toward Valerie, who lay pale and unconscious there among the rose-vines ; "the young lady seems to be seriously hurt."

"She looks as if she was dead," said Archie, dropping on one knee beside the prostrate form, and placing his hand on her heart.

"Oh, surely not !" exclaimed the young girl, regretfully. "She cannot be dead."

"No, her heart beats ;" he assured her, looking up. "There is still a spark of life, but something must be done for her."

As he said this he looked back helplessly toward Lord Charleroy and Lady Maud, who were just climbing over the fence, the latter having so far forgotten

her dignity in her excitement as to spring from the top railing unassisted.

"Perhaps you had better bring her into the house, and Nurse Llorenta will help you to revive her," said the young girl at his side. But Lord Dancourt awaited the approach of Lady Maud and Lord Charleroy before deciding what would be best to do.

As they came up, both glanced at the strange, beautiful girl in wonder, in spite of their agitation; but as Lord Charleroy looked down at Valerie's pale face, he cried out in alarm :

"My God ! she is dead !" he exclaimed.

"No, not dead, but wounded, I think," Archie replied, as he turned the unconscious girl's head and discovered an ugly gash above her left temple, which had struck the side of the summer-house in falling. "Shall we carry her into the house?"

"If the lady will permit it," said Lord Charleroy, turning his glance upon the slender black figure beside them.

"She has given me permission," said Archie, quickly.

"Yes, come," said she, kindly. "I feel sure that Nurse Llorenta can help you."

Lord Charleroy bent down and took Valerie's light form in his arms; and as they followed their lovely guide toward the house, Lord Dancourt managed to drop back and whisper to Lady Maud that the young girl ahead of them was the same that he had seen at the window of Lane Park, and to ask her if she didn't think her beautiful, and if she wasn't now convinced that it was something more substantial than a ghost. To all of which Lady Maud replied "Yes" in an ab-

sent tone, her mind wandering at the same time to Lord Charleroy, who it seemed to her had been unduly agitated over Valerie Thoresby's mishap.

How eager he had been to carry her, she thought, and how closely he held her in his arms now as he bore her unconscious form toward the house. A strange pang shot through Lady Maud's heart. She turned her eyes away to prevent herself from seeing the sight that pained her. She was relieved when they reached the house and the young mistress of Lane Park showed them into a tastefully furnished little sitting-room, where she motioned Lord Charleroy to place his burden on the lounge.

She then touched a small silver bell on the table, and it was but a moment before an old woman, whose swarthy skin and glittering black eyes told plainly that she was a Spaniard, came into the room.

The young girl spoke to her, saying :

"Nurse, this lady here has been thrown from her horse and wounded. Carry her into my apartments at once and do what you can for her. Be quick ! there is no time to lose."

The woman made some reply in her native tongue, and, going up to the lounge, raised Valerie's unconscious form in her arms as if she had been a feather's weight.

The young mistress turned to those in the room with a smile that made her rare beauty something marvellous, and said : "Nurse Llorenta does not speak English very well ; you must pardon her." Then, without waiting for a reply, she turned and went towards the door at the other end of the apartment and flung it open, standing aside for the woman to pass through.

“Will you come?” she asked, looking toward Lady Maud. “Perhaps we may do some good. The gentlemen can wait here, if they like. I will have the horses put in the stable until they are ready to return.”

Both Archie and Lord Charleroy thanked her very warmly, and replied that they would wait, while Lady Maud followed her into the adjoining apartment, where Valerie had been placed on the exquisite lace-draped bed. The room was such a bower of beauty that Lady Maud, accustomed though she was to all the elegance of refinement and wealth, could not resist the temptation to look around her. It was not the splendor of the apartment so much as the rich blending of bright colors that dazzled the eye; and at any other time Lady Maud would have called it all too gaudy, and declared that the appointments of the room were not in taste; but it seemed in such perfect harmony with the brilliant beauty of the young girl herself, that it charmed instead of displeasing her.

Lady Maud seated herself; and for the first time she had the opportunity of noticing the young mistress of Lane Park closely. Archie's enthusiastic description of her at once came back to her mind, and she decided that the picture he had made of her had not been overdrawn. There was no question about it. The girl was beautiful.

Nurse Llorenta, as her young mistress called her, set to work at once to do what she could for the wounded girl; but she seemed in no hurry whatever to return to consciousness. At length the woman seemed to grow alarmed, and she turned to her mistress and said something in an excited tone.

Lady Maud looked up uneasily.

"Is she not reviving?" she asked.

"No," the girl replied. "Nurse thinks that a physician had best be sent for."

Lady Maud arose hastily to her feet and went toward the room where she had left Archie and Lord Charleroy.

"I will see to it at once," she said, as she opened the door, and closed it behind her.

Both Lord Charleroy and Archie looked up eagerly as she entered the room ; but she made her way to the former, saying :

"Miss Thoresby has not revived. Perhaps you had better go for your sister and bring a physician immediately."

Lord Charleroy sprang up quickly, and it seemed to Lady Maud's excited fancy that he turned a shade paler.

"You need not alarm yourself unnecessarily," she added, with an imperceptible sneer, as he jerked up his hat and hurried out. As she spoke, he looked back and inquired :

"Will you remain until I return?"

"Of course," she replied almost coldly.

When he was gone, she turned to Lord Dancourt, who had arisen and was walking restlessly up and down the room ; but before she could speak, he looked up, saying :

"Miss Thoresby's mishap was very unfortunate. I dare say Lady Thoresby will blame us with it all."

"How can she?" exclaimed Lady Maud, with a touch of indignation. "It was a most headstrong act in Valerie. If she lives, she will be fortunate, after such

a rash leap as she made. No, it is impossible for blame to be attached to any one but herself ; but"—scornfully—"it seems that your feelings, and also Lord Charleroy's, have overcome your common-sense."

"It is enough to upset any one," said Archie, impatiently.

"I am heartily sorry that *I* consented to come to Lane Park," declared Lady Maud.

"So am I—no, I'm not. I say, Maud"—with sudden energy—"what is the young lady's name?"

"You mean the mistress of Lane Park?"

"Is she the mistress? I did not know. Yes, I mean our hostess."

"I am sure I have not been inquisitive enough to learn," she replied unamiably.

"Then you have a small amount of curiosity—that's all I have to say."

"You had the same opportunity to ask her yourself whom she was. Why didn't you do it?"

"I am a man."

"And I am a lady."

"Maud, you are aggravating. Why can't you be civil?"

"Because I am not in a civil mood."

"Then leave me," he said, dropping down impatiently into a chair ; "and I hope you are worth more in the next room."

Lady Maud, who was quite ready to go, obeyed the command and re-entered the room where Valerie was lying—now slowly coming back to life. She approached the bedside and laid her hand on her damp brow.

"She is reviving, is she not?" she asked of the

nurse, who stood on the other side of her, but the young mistress answered her,

"Yes," she replied. "You need not be uneasy. I hardly think her wound is very bad."

"You are very kind to us," said Lady Maud gratefully. "We were hardly prepared to find such an agreeable neighbor at Lane Park."

"Do you live near here?" she asked quickly.

"Not a great distance. Have you ever heard of Floradene?"

Yes, she had seen the place.

"And Merivale?"

Lady Maud saw her start violently.

"Merivale!" she exclaimed.

"Yes—Merivale. Why does it agitate you?" asked Lady Maud, in surprise.

"Do you live there?" she eagerly inquired.

"I do; I am Lady Maud Dancourt."

As the latter said this, she was amazed to see the change that swept over the girl's face. She drew back from her, cold and haughty.

"Be assured that I did not know this, Lady Maud Dancourt," she said scornfully.

"Know what?" asked Lady Maud, blankly.

"That you were a Dancourt."

"And pray what have the Dancourts done to you?" asked Lady Maud, in amazement.

"Driven my mother to her grave," was the reply in a hoarse voice.

But even yet Lady Maud did not understand. She looked at the pale, agitated face of the girl before her for several moments in mute astonishment. Nurse Llorenta, who had taken no part in the conversation,

and who was busily engaged with Valerie, placed a wine-glass in her hand for her to hold a moment, and Lady Maud took it without being aware of what she had done.

"I am quite sure that I am in ignorance of your meaning," she said bewilderedly. "The Dancourts are an honorable race."

The girl's lip curled scornfully.

"Honorable!" she exclaimed. "I might believe you"—with a derisive laugh—"if I had not been more correctly informed. Your grandfather, George Dancourt, Lord Southwolde, was a scoundrel, Lady Maud Dancourt"—fearlessly.

The girl's audacity took Lady Maud's breath away.

"Madam," she indignantly exclaimed, "who are you that dare to take such privilege with a noble name as this?"

"I am the daughter of a man who—oh, grievous misfortune!—did not belong to the nobility"—with fine contempt; "yet who, in the true sense of the word, was every inch a nobleman—whose wife—my mother—even the angels would not have blushed to claim. If you do not know me—I am Izma Alvarez."

The wine-glass which had been placed in Lady Maud's hand slipped from her nerveless fingers and fell with a crash to the floor, spilling its contents. She fell back speechless and amazed, staring at the beautiful girl who so bravely defended her dead parents incredulously.

"Renzo Alvarez's daughter!" she exclaimed.

"Yes—thank Heaven!" was the reply. "No woman was ever prouder of her name."

Nurse Llorenta, noticing for the first time with the

fall of the wine-glass that there was some excitement between her mistress and the stranger, stopped and looked from one to the other in surprise. The former, meeting her eyes and remembering the helpless girl there upon the bed, suppressed her excitement as best she could, and calmly seated herself in a chair.

"It is very unfortunate that circumstances should have thrown us together," she said coolly to Lady Maud.

"Yet I am glad to say, Miss Alvarez, that the Dancourts need not impose upon your hospitality," Lady Maud replied with dignity. "Miss Thoresby"—with a nod toward the bed—"may not be able to be removed at once; but she is no relation to any one at Merivale, or I would risk her life in preference to leaving her at Lane Park."

"In that case I should advise you to do so," said Miss Alvarez, with superb indifference.

Lady Maud's heart beat angrily. She could scarcely keep back the torrent of indignant words that rose to her lips.

"You need have no fear that any one at Merivale will trouble you," she retorted proudly. "If I had known that you were at Lane Park, we would not have been here to-day. You cannot regret the unfortunate circumstance any more than I do, Miss Alvarez; for"—significantly—"the Dancourts are very careful about choosing their friends."

Izma sprang to her feet. She was about to make an angry reply when there was a sudden knock outside that interrupted her; and as Nurse Llorenta opened the door, she saw that it was a gentleman—evidently the physician who had been sent for.

As soon as Lady Maud learned whom it was, she made her escape from the room and returned to Lord Dancourt, who was sitting just where she had left him a short while before.

He looked up at her flushed, excited face in surprise.

"Come!" she said, without giving him time to speak. "I will leave this house immediately."

"What do you mean?" he asked, astonished. "Lady Thoresby has not come yet. We cannot leave Miss Thoresby alone."

"She is not alone. The physician is here, and doubtless Lady Thoresby is on her way. I can do Valerie no good ; and I tell you I will not remain at Lane Park another hour."

"Why, what has happened?" exclaimed Archie, rising to his feet.

"I have only learned the name of the peerless creature whom you so greatly admire," she replied, with a hysterical laugh. "You might as well fall in love with another at once, Archie, for the mistress of Lane Park is Izma Alvarez."

At first, Archie refused to credit it ; but when Lady Maud related to him what had passed, and declared that, if he did not come with her, she would leave the place alone, he knew that she was speaking truthfully. And though he replied that he was not the least disappointed in the discovery, he felt his heart sink and his hopes crumble ; for how, indeed, could a Dancourt gain the good-will of Izma Alvarez?

Yet he was unwilling to leave Lane Park until the arrival of Lady Thoresby ; but though he coaxed and reasoned, it was to no purpose, and he was compelled to accompany Lady Maud back to Merivale.

CHAPTER XIV.

“SWEETS TO THE SWEET.”

THE day had without doubt been a failure and a disappointment. Even Archie, who was usually so light of heart, reached Merivale silent and gloomy, and when he was met in the hall by the Earl of Southwolde, who asked him curiously if he had enjoyed the day, he replied that he had no wish to live it over; and without stopping to be questioned further, he made his way to the seclusion of his own room.

From Lady Maud, however, the Countess learned all that had taken place at Lane Park; and as soon as possible, the news was conveyed to the Earl. Very discouraging news it was, too, to him; as Lady Maud had declared that they would of course never go to Lane Park again, as Izma Alvarez had insulted them. But the Countess was eager to hear what Archie himself would have to say about it.

She did not have the chance of questioning him until the following morning, when she entered the library and found Lord Dancourt sitting there with his feet propped high against the window and puffing vigorously at a cigar. His back was turned, and he was so completely buried in the cushions of the chair that at a first glance the Countess, seeing nothing but a dense cloud of smoke, thought the curtains were on fire; but the pair of legs, which a closer observation brought

to light, reassured her, and, with a stifled cough, she approached the chair.

"Archie," she said reprovingly, "how often are you to be told about smoking in this part of the house? It is"—with another cough—"beyond one's endurance."

"I beg pardon," he said, rising to his feet, with a sleepy yawn, which did not speak well for his rest during the past night, and flinging his cigar through the window; "I thought I was alone."

"Which isn't any excuse for you"—severely.

"There! it's all gone," he said, with a lazy smile, as he fanned the smoke through the window and dropped back into his chair. "Don't be hard on a fellow, mother, when he is all broken up, as I am this morning."

"What is the matter?" asked the Countess.

"That's what I can't tell you. But it may be—yes—no—I'm not certain, but I think I have just discovered that I have nerves."

"That you have what?" asked the Countess, puzzled.

"Nerves, mother dear. You know women complain of having them. Yes, I am sure that is it. I couldn't sleep last night on account of my nerves."

"Oh!" said the Countess, comprehending at last; "you mean you are nervous."

"Yes, nervous. I think the trip to Lane Park yesterday made me nervous."

"Very likely, as it turned out so disastrously."

"Have you heard from Miss Thoresby this morning?" Archie inquired.

"No; but I shall send John to Lane Park before the morning is over. I trust that Miss Alvarez will

not drive him off her premises when she learns that he is from Merivale"—sarcastically.

Archie laughed dryly.

"I feel sure that she will not," he said.

"Were you not surprised when you learned whom the girl was?" asked the Countess, eying him closely.

"Well—rather," he confessed. "Weren't you?"

"I should say so. I was angered, as well, at her impudence to Maud. Of course, my son, you will have nothing more to do with her. You will not even speak to her if you should chance to meet."

"That would be rather churlish, would it not, mother?" he replied, with a smile. "But I dare say any acquaintance on my part would be resented by Miss Alvarez. You need have no fear of that ; as I do not think I am capable of overcoming her aversion to the Dancourts."

"Her arrogance is quite amusing," said Lady Southwolde, with a laugh of derision. "She knows that there could be no terms of intimacy between herself and the Dancourts, and therefore assumes this *rôle*."

"But, mother, she is a lady—a true lady," defended Archie. "One can look at her and see that. No one need be ashamed to claim Izma Alvarez for a friend."

"Oh, then, you are not yet disenchanted," said the Countess, with a slight sneer.

"Most truly I am not. I was more charmed with her yesterday than ever. I am only sorry that she is an enemy to the Dancourts."

"Bah! Archie, you weary me," said Lady Southwolde, turning away impatiently. "I thought you had more pride and common-sense than to admire such a woman as this. I do not wish to hear any more of

her." And saying this, she swept majestically from the room, feeling none the better for what she had learned.

But she kept her word about sending to Lane Park and inquiring after Miss Thoresby ; although she declared that under any other circumstances, even her servants should not go near the place. But she was eager to learn how long Valerie would be compelled to remain at Lane Park, for a new dread had suddenly sprung up in her mind. If the Thoresbys and Miss Alvarez should become too well acquainted, it was probable that the well-guarded secret of the Earl's failure would remain a secret no longer, she thought. Renzo Alvarez's daughter would tell them that, though the Dancourts boasted of their patrician blood, their estate was swallowed up by an enormous mortgage, and their income was comparatively nothing.

Izma's coming to England was the last thing on earth Lady Southwolde would have desired—and much less to their very neighborhood ; but that the Thoresbys should be detained beneath the roof of Lane Park was worse than she had even imagined. Nor was the news with which John returned to Merivale that morning in the least consoling. It was just as she had feared :

"Although Miss Thoresby was not considered in danger, her present condition would not permit of her being safely removed to Floradene for several days to come, as the injury which she had received had thrown her into a high fever, which the physician feared might prove serious if there was any excitement. But Lady Thoresby was with her, and she was in very kind

hands ; and with careful attention, it was thought that her injuries would not amount to anything."

This was enough to tell Lady Southwolde that the acquaintance between Izma Alvarez and Lady Thoresby was likely to ripen into intimacy ; and the more she thought of it, the more troubled her mind grew. It seemed that there was no end to her sorrow. Each day a new thorn sprung up in her path.

Lady Maud regretted that she could not visit Valerie during her illness, but nothing could have induced her to return to Lane Park. Fearing that she would think unkindly of her, she decided to write a note to her, explaining her reasons for not coming as best she could, and send it with a choice bouquet to Lane Park.

She wrote the note immediately, and went out into the flower-garden to clip the blossoms and array the bouquet with her own hands. The task was but half finished, however, when she was interrupted by Lord Charleroy, who came upon her so suddenly, as she was bending over a rose-bush, that she gave a little startled scream and dropped the flowers she held in her hand.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed in a nettled tone, as she turned and saw whom it was, "how you frightened me! It always vexes me to be startled in that manner. Why didn't you make a noise before you reached me?"

"I am sure I walked as heavily as possible," he replied. "Your mind was either deeply interested in your work or you was thinking of something far away from this spot ; otherwise you would have heard me as I approached."

"But you are the very last person I expected to see

this morning," she declared, turning back to the rose-bush and clipping another flower, while he bent down and gathered up those she had spilled.

"Why?" he asked. "I should have thought that I would be the first one whom you expected after the way in which you ran away from Lane Park yesterday."

"No; but I thought, of course, that you would be at Lane Park this morning," she said.

"Rita is there, you know, and I am not needed. I haven't been back since yesterday morning."

"Haven't you indeed?" asked Lady Maud, in surprise.

"No, I preferred coming here," he replied, as he placed the flowers in her hand. "Lane Park seems such a beastly distance from Floradene; and I thought I would be more appreciated elsewhere."

"Why, Lane Park isn't much farther than Merivale!" said Lady Maud, with admirable unconcern, as she continued to clip the roses, but pleased nevertheless at the choice that he had made.

"No; but the truth is, I wanted to see you, Lady Maud."

"Yes, no doubt I owe you an explanation for the way in which I left Lane Park yesterday," she said, ignoring his meaning. "It was rather unfortunate, but Miss Alvarez and I quarrelled"—with a little scornful smile.

"No, not so soon!"

"We did indeed. I shall never return there." She turned and faced him. "Did you ever hear of Lady Adelene Dancourt, Lord Charleroy?" she asked.

"Yes, from my mother," he replied.

“Then you know her story, do you not?”—reluctantly.

He nodded.

“I am glad of it, as it will save me the trouble of repeating it,” she said in a relieved tone. “You will understand that there can be no feeling of friendship between the Dancourts and the mistress of Lane Park when I tell you that the latter is the daughter of Lady Adelene and Renzo Alvarez—the man with whom she fled.”

“Is it possible!” exclaimed Lord Charleroy, in astonishment. “Are her parents dead?”

“Yes, both of them. She is alone; yet she refused the shelter of Merivale. I can never like her, my lord—never.”

“Yet she is so beautiful and refined!” said Lord Charleroy, wonderingly. “I think she is next to the fairest woman I ever saw. If it had not been for that other, I would have fallen in love with her.”

Lady Maud’s heart grew strangely and suddenly cold. He was speaking of Valerie Thoresby—she felt sure of it.

“Oh, she is beautiful enough,” she admitted, with a toss of her proud head as she arranged the flowers in her white hands; “but is she good enough? That is the question.”

“Will Archie too cut her acquaintance?” he asked, with a smile.

“I hardly think Miss Alvarez will allow him an acquaintance,” she replied. “She is no friend to the Dancourts. I believe, however, that he is still foolishly in love with her.”

“No man’s love should be called foolish, Lady Maud.”

Yet there should be no marriages of unequal births. I do not believe heaven ever intended it so.”

“But to my mind, Lady Maud, there never was a man who was equal in any respect to a pure woman. There is as much difference between them as in daylight and darkness.”

“Yet they may have the same mothers and the same fathers—their blood can be the same, their births equal. In one sense you may be right—the lives of few men are spotless; but there is a difference, my lord, a wide difference, between the plebeian and the patrician.”

“Would you love beneath you, Lady Maud?”

“Not in birth.”

“But if a man was highly born and far beneath you in all else, what would you then say?”

“If I knew such a man I could then tell you, Lord Charleroy.”

He had flung himself down upon a bench just beside the rose-bush while he was speaking, and was looking closely up into Lady Maud’s fair, proud face. Her queenly beauty had never before so greatly charmed him. She looked so much like a princess born that he could not help feeling his own inferiority. She had drawn very near him in cutting the flowers from the bushes that grew around him, and moved by a sudden impulse, he reached out and caught her by the hand.

“Why are you so formal with me, Lady Maud?” he asked. “It is always ‘my lord’ and ‘Lord Charleroy’ whenever you speak to me; and I remember the time when it was nothing but ‘Elwood.’”

"You forget," she said, flushing and attempting to draw her hand away from him, "we were then children. We are too old now to use such freedom."

"I think we are yet very young," he replied, with a tender smile.

"But let go my hand, Lord Charleroy. See! you are causing me to spill all my flowers again, and I meant to send them to Valerie."

"Sit here beside me, and I will help you to arrange them," he said, drawing her down upon the bench in spite of her efforts to release herself. "I intend to keep you until I have heard you use the old familiar name."

"Do you think you can compel me?" she asked, shutting her lips tightly.

He laughed.

"No—never; but perhaps I can persuade you. Won't you say it—just to hear how it would sound?"

"Oh, let us finish the bouquet," she replied evasively. "If you don't help me, I shall not sit here."

"You are very cruel to me, Lady Maud," he said reproachfully, as he began to pick up the flowers in her lap and put them together. "Are you so to every one?"

"Not intentionally."

"Then it is only to me. Why is it, Lady Maud? Do you really dislike me?"

"I do *not* dislike you, Lord Charleroy."

"But you had made up your mind to do so."

Lady Maud laughed a little amused laugh.

"You are very unforgiving, my lord," she said.

"Do you know, those words pained me very much? That is why I cannot forget them."

She was silent. She did not even look up, but kept her eyes bent on the flowers in her hands, arranging and rearranging them, and now and then holding them out admiringly, as if her mind was entirely taken up with them.

"Presently I shall be growing jealous of those flowers," he said, after the lapse of a minute.

"They are indeed pretty," she replied, with a smile. "Do you think Valerie will like them?"

"If she doesn't, she will have very poor taste."

Another momentary pause, in which Lady Maud grew very nervous.

Suddenly, without speaking, Lord Charleroy covered the white hand lying idly on her lap with his own. She looked up startled; but there was something in his face which prevented her from drawing it away from him. Her eyes dropped again, and her heart thrilled with a new sweet sensation.

He leaned nearer to her, and she could feel his hot breath fan her cheek. In that moment she forgot all her former resolutions and misgivings. She knew nothing but her love for the man at her side.

"Maud," he breathed passionately, "if I was only sure that your heart was free, I am mad enough to hope to-day that you have not forgotten the betrothal that was made for us in our childhood. Tell me with your own lips that you remember it."

"I do," she replied softly, with downcast eyes.

"And you have been true to it?" eagerly.

"You have no right to ask me that," she said quickly, looking up and drawing away from him.

"Why have I not? The Earl of Southwolde gave you to me long ago, by a sacred promise, and I like

you better than any girl I ever saw. Why have I not the right to know whether in my absence your heart has gone out to another?"

She had opened her lips and was about to reply when, chancing to raise her eyes again, she saw Lord Dancourt in the distance, coming toward them, and drew nervously away from Lord Charleroy's side.

"There comes Archie," she said. And Lord Charleroy, following her glance and seeing that she was right, rose to his feet, with a muttered "Confound it!"

A moment, however, and he turned back to Lady Maud. She too had arisen, and he reached out and possessed himself of both her hands.

"Now grant my first request of you, before he reaches us," he said beseechingly.

"How am I to remember?" she asked demurely.

"Oh, don't be unkind. Quick! Archie is very much nearer."

She glanced up into his face swiftly and shyly, her eyes sought the ground again, and then, her cheeks crimsoning, she murmured:

"Elwood!"

CHAPTER XV.

A DOUBTFUL HEART.

By the time Lord Dancourt reached the two, Lady Maud was again busying herself among the flowers, and Lord Charleroy was making a pretence of helping her; but as Archie came up, he looked curiously into Lady Maud's flushed face.

"Oh, ho!" he thought, "I have interrupted a *tête-à-tête*." But he endeavored to appear very uncenscious.

"So Maud has put you to work, has she, Charleroy?" he said, with a smile. "I thought so, from the way in which you lingered out here. I waited for you to return to the house until my patience grew threadbare."

"We were just coming as we saw you," replied Lord Charleroy, glibly.

"Then I might have waited; but I wanted to ask you if you wouldn't run up to London with me to-night."

"To-night! For what?"

"Oh, nothing—only it's so dull at Merivale just now, that I thought a change might help us both. I believe you are alone at Floradene, too. Wouldn't you like it for a few days?"

"I wouldn't mind," replied Lord Charleroy; "but"—with a glance toward Lady Maud, who refused to look up—"why not wait until to-morrow?"

"Then I wouldn't be in the same notion. No; if I go, it must be to-night, so that we will be in London to-morrow."

"Well, I might go," consented Lord Charleroy, with evident reluctance, "if it is to be for only a few days."

"I give you my word I do not intend to remain long. I will return at your pleasure. Go, if for nothing else but to oblige me," insisted Archie.

"Well, to oblige you, then, I have consented."

Lady Maud at this moment looked up and turned toward Lord Charleroy.

"Good-bye," she said, holding out her hand to him.

"I will not see you any more if you are going away to-night. I must leave you now, as I am in haste to send these"—touching the flowers in her hand—"and a message to Lane Park."

Lord Charleroy took her hand and gave it a gentle pressure ; and before he could frame a reply, she had turned from him and was hurrying toward the house.

He looked after her wistfully, forgetting himself until Archie spoke to him.

If Lady Maud had been left to decide the question, she would have much preferred that Lord Charleroy would not go to London. He had been away from Floradene so long that it seemed to her that he might remain at home a while longer before again going away. She was vexed with Archie for proposing it, and disappointed with Lord Charleroy for accepting. Why could he not have refused ?

She was not as happy as she might have been, although her pulses quickened and the color came and went in her cheeks as she thought of what had occurred in the flower-garden only a short while before.

She sent her message on its way to Valerie, and then, unobserved, slipped away to her own room, where she locked herself in and sat down to think over all that Lord Charleroy had said to her.

She was disappointed—she was forced to admit it—after having reviewed the scene several times. After all, she thought, what had he said to her to cause her to show her own love for him ? True, Lord Dancourt had interrupted him, but then he had only said that he *liked* her, and had called her nothing but "Maud"—plain Maud, with nothing else to it ; and even the Duke

of Ellesmere had been more lover-like than that, when she had never given him the least encouragement.

Oh, if she had only been more prudent! she thought, a flush of shame creeping up to her proud face, as she remembered how she had allowed Lord Charleroy to see that she cared for him. Perhaps because of the contract between their fathers, he felt in duty bound to propose to her; and perhaps even now he was regretting that her heart was his own. Oh, why did she not think of all this beforehand, and not allow her passion to master her? She could at least have put him to the test by offering him his freedom.

"I will do it when he returns," she decided at last. "It is not too late. He shall see that I am not so eager for him as he thought. I will not be so weak as to be easily won after his long neglect of me. When he wins Lady Maud Dancourt, he will have to *love* her, not *like* her, even though she suits his fancy better than 'any girl he ever saw.'"

And though her own foolish pride made her miserable, she was determined to keep her word in this instance, no matter what it cost her.

The Countess of Southwolde smiled significantly when she heard that Lord Charleroy was going away.

"Dear, dear!" she exclaimed in surprise. "Why, he hardly reaches home before he runs off again. I would not allow it, Maud."

"I have nothing to do with it," Lady Maud replied curtly.

"I wouldn't make such an ado over nothing, mother," said Lord Dancourt, who was standing by, in a rather disgusted tone. "Lord Charleroy is only going

to London with me for a few days. No sensible woman could surely object to that."

"But I was only thinking how much he must dislike Floradene, and if he should take it into his head to remain away as long as he did before, you know," she said, mildly.

"He is not liable to have any such a turn," replied Archie, impatiently. "I dare say Maud is not afraid of it"—looking at the latter with a meaning smile.

Lady Southwolde glanced quickly from one to the other to see if anything had occurred which she had not heard, but it was impossible to gain the least clue from her daughter's calm countenance.

Her suspicions, however, had been aroused ; and the following day, after Archie and Lord Charleroy's departure, she went into Lady Maud's room, and, after a few incidental remarks, said to her :

"It seems, my dear, that Lord Charleroy is as slow about proposing as he was in coming back to Floradene. How long had you known the Duke of Ellesmere before he asked you to become his wife?"

Lady Maud was not surprised. She had been expecting this, and was prepared for it.

"The Duke? Oh, I had known him quite a month, I think," she replied, calmly.

"A month! And you have been knowing Lord Charleroy a lifetime."

Lady Maud smiled, but did not reply.

"What is the man thinking about, can you tell me?" the Countess asked.

"I am sure I don't know," Lady Maud answered, pretending to suppress a yawn.

"Has he never said a word to you?"

"Yes, mother, a great many."

"Maud, do not be insolent," reproved the Countess, becoming vexed at the failure of her cross-questioning.

Lady Maud laughed good-humoredly.

"I do not mean to be," she replied.

"I think I shall ask your father to speak to Lord Charleroy as soon as he returns home," said Lady Southwolde, tersely.

The expression of Lady Maud's face changed instantly, just as the Countess knew it would.

"Mother, you forget that this is very trying," she said reproachfully. "Are you eager to be rid of me? If not, why should father speak to Lord Charleroy?"

"No; but I fain would keep you for a better man, Maud," she replied earnestly. "If your father spoke to Lord Charleroy, it would be to tell him that he need not aspire for his daughter's hand."

"Oh, I see!" said Lady Maud, suppressing her rising anger. "All this is to turn me against Lord Charleroy; but you can never do it, mother,—it is useless to try. I shall never dislike him so long as I live."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the Countess, sneeringly. And Lady Maud, knowing that she could no longer control herself, arose and hastily left the room.

But there was yet another trial that she was to undergo. A few days later, the Countess received a letter from Lady Bromley, an aunt to the Duke of Ellesmere, and the very same that had brought about the acquaintance between his highness and Lady Maud, saying that she would at last accept Lady Southwolde's kind invitation to visit Merivale, and that she would

leave London at once, reaching her destination on the day following that on which the letter was received.

So nothing was left but to prepare for her, and though Lady Maud secretly disliked her, and was displeased at her coming, she was forced to greet her pleasantly when she arrived. Neither was the Countess pleased, on account of their straitened circumstances ; but outside of this, there was no one in whom she delighted more than Lady Bromley.

True, she was a gossip—no one escaped her. Be they “as chaste as ice, as pure as snow,” Lady Bromley did not spare them ; but this was no reason why she should be distasteful to the Countess of Southwolde. Besides, no one could afford to slight one so rich and highly connected as this aunt of the Duke of Ellesmere—the latter, to the Countess, being the principal clause in her favor. In personal appearance—as Lord Dancourt had once declared—she was “positively nothing.” She was by no means handsome ; yet Lady Maud, at least, might have forgiven her for her lack of beauty, if it had not been for her dumpy figure, which so reminded her of the Duke.

Perhaps her relationship to the Duke of Ellesmere was the beginning of Lady Maud’s dislike ; but the latter felt quite sure that Lady Bromley could not remain long at Merivale without making herself disagreeable to some one.

It came about rather sooner than she expected, however—being the very day of her arrival, and happening to fall directly upon herself.

Lady Bromley had scarcely made herself comfortable in the house before she inquired for Lord Dancourt.

"Where is your son, Lady Southwolde?" she asked. "Is he not at Merivale?"

"No, Lady Bromley. I am sorry, but he went up to London a few days ago," the Countess replied.

"Indeed! I shall regret it if I do not get to see him."

"Oh, he is only to be gone a short while. He will return, I dare say, before we think of allowing you to leave us."

"Ah! a short business trip, I presume," said Lady Bromley, blandly.

"No; Archie seldom troubles himself with business affairs," the Countess replied, smiling. "I think he only went for a change; as he was tired of the monotony of Merivale."

"I suppose he went alone"—inquisitively.

"Lord Charleroy accompanied him," replied the Countess, quietly.

"Lord Charleroy!" exclaimed Lady Bromley, holding up her hands in horror. "You don't mean to tell me, Lady Southwolde, that your son is in London with Lord Charleroy!"

Lady Maud, who was sitting apart from the two, on the other side of the room, glanced up quickly, with an eager flush on her face. The Countess looked at her guest in surprise.

"Certainly," she replied. "What is wrong with Archie being with Lord Charleroy?"

"Oh, such company, Lady Southwolde! Your son will be ruined," Lady Bromley declared in a shocked tone.

The Countess quickly saw Lady Bromley's meaning; but she did not wish to appear too ready to under-

stand. She glanced at Lady Maud to see if she was listening, and, satisfying herself on that question, turned back to her disagreeable guest, saying :

“The Charleroy's were ever considered one of the best families in England, your ladyship. What do you mean?”

“Their pedigree does well enough, Lady Southwold ; but this Lord Charleroy—oh, I am really surprised that you have not heard what an undesirable young man he is ! Why, I learned long before he returned to England, that he had wasted a fortune ; but that isn't the worst of it. He hasn't even made a pretence of reforming ; and is even now in London on a spree.”

Lady Maud could no longer subdue her indignation.

“You must certainly be mistaken, Lady Bromley,” she said, her bosom heaving. “Archie and Lord Charleroy went away together ; and I am quite sure that it was not for the purpose of a ‘spree’”—with slight scorn on the latter word.

“I beg your pardon, my dear,” replied Lady Bromley, apologetically. “I had indeed forgotten that Lord Charleroy lived at Floradene, and was probably a friend of yours. But as for Lord Dancourt, he is no doubt innocent. I knew nothing of him being with Lord Charleroy until a moment ago ; and you will not wonder at my amazement when you have heard me through. You have not lived long enough yet, Lady Maud, to learn the world, but it is quite true that one man knows another. So when my nephew, the Duke of Ellesmere, came to me a few days before I left London and told me how Lord Charleroy was disgracing himself and going headlong

to his ruin, I could not possibly doubt it, as there was no chance of his being mistaken."

"The Duke of Ellesmere!" exclaimed the Countess, in astonishment. "I thought your nephew was abroad, Lady Bromley."

"So he was; but he returned just two weeks ago," she replied, giving Lady Maud a sidelong glance. "I can hardly understand Allan of late. Something seems wrong with him."

"Is it possible," said Lady Southwolde, dryly. And Lady Maud, who was annoyed beyond endurance, rose to her feet and made her escape through the open window there at her side. Angry, disappointed, and miserable, she hurried across the balcony and terrace, and, reaching the lime walk at last, flung herself down and gave way to a passionate fit of tears.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DAY AT FLORADENE.

A WEEK went by, and there was little change except that Valerie Thoresby had sufficiently recovered to be removed from Lane Park to Floradene, and Lord Thoresby had come down from Scotland to be with his wife. The days at Merivale grew melancholy for Lady Maud. She began to think at last that the old place wasn't much without Archie, and to heartily wish for his return home. Lady Bromley lingered with a persistency that discouraged even the Countess; but she was too well bred to make the least display

of her true feelings, even if she had not had a deeper motive for courting the good-will of the Duke of Ellesmere's aunt.

In the mean time, she did not lose occasion to become confidential with Lady Bromley, and to whisper to her that it was her opinion that Maud had refused the Duke rashly, and had since then regretted it. She was quite sure, she said, that it was only one of her daughter's caprices, which could easily be overcome if the Duke should again seek her. Like most proud young girls, she did not desire to be lightly won, and his highness had been too ready to accept her "no" to please her. The Countess felt assured that it had all been a mistake, and that, if the Duke had not gone abroad so quickly, it would have been righted ere now.

Lady Bromley was delighted at this speech ; for it was nothing more nor less than in the behalf of her nephew that she had come to Merivale. She was perfectly conscious, too, of Lady Maud's early betrothal to Lord Charleroy, in spite of her pretended ignorance of the fact. How she had learned it, no one exactly knew ; but, then, no one could tell how she learned everything. For the very reason of this betrothal she had spoken against Lord Charleroy in the presence of Lady Maud, and, indeed, had said things which were not strictly true ; for, though the Duke of Ellesmere *had* seen Lord Charleroy in London, and had stood beside him at the club-rooms when he took a single glass of wine, this was the only ground her ladyship had for asserting that the master of Floradene was in London "on a spree" and "going to his ruin, and disgracing himself."

The seed of distrust, however, had been sown in Lady Maud's heart, and for a whole week she had been restless and unhappy. It seemed too that Lord Charleroy and Archie were remaining away longer than they had promised.

During the week, Lady Maud had gone once to Floradene, but even this visit hardly satisfied her. She had found Valerie looking paler and some thinner than usual, and Lady Thoresby had been loud in her praises of Izma Alvarez. She was by far the most beautiful girl she had ever seen, and one of the sweetest and kindest hearted. She and Valerie both had fallen in love with her, and it seemed so lonely for her at Lane Park that they had invited her to visit them often at Floradene. Lady Thoresby was very sorry that Lady Maud did not like her ; but she hoped to be the means of yet bringing about a friendship between them, and overcoming the prejudice which existed between the Dancourts and Miss Alvarez.

Lady Maud, however, declared that it could never be, and expressed a wish as to never be so unfortunate as to meet Miss Alvarez at Floradene, hinting something about being careful in choosing her friends, and smiling in such a significant manner as to call forth a resentful remark from Lady Thoresby, who reminded her that Isma Alvarez was only a friend to herself and Valerie, and, if she wasn't much mistaken, she was a relative to the Dancourts.

This caused a coolness to arise between the two, and for several days Lady Maud had neither sent nor gone to Floradene. She decided, in her own mind, that it would be best to let the Charleroy's alone forever. Yet she grew very tired of her own company,

and once or twice came very near weakening in her resolve. At the end of the week she had read until even Byron, her favorite, seemed commonplace and monotonous. His love ditties, his wit and scepticism, all wearied her alike. She had painted a litte, had made a vain attempt at a picture, and drummed on the piano in the hope of driving Lady Bromley mad, until, having exhausted every means of entertaining herself, she was quite ready to forgive and forget when Lady Thoresby sent the carriage over to Merivale with the message that she was to come to Floradene at once.

It was a great relief to Lady Maud, for she would have much preferred Lady Thoresby to make the advances ; and she did not hesitate to prepare herself quickly, and readily comply with the request. It was something, she told the Countess when taking her leave, to spend the day away from that "great old nuisance, Lady Bromley, who was enough like the Duke of Ellesmere to be his sister instead of his aunt."

With this discouraging remark, she took her departure ; and she had been gone scarcely an hour, when Lord Dancourt and Lord Charleroy both presented themselves at Merivale, dusty and travel-stained, having just arrived from London on the last train.

They were disappointed to learn that Lady Maud was not there—particularly Lord Charleroy, who said he would go over to Floradene at once ; and Archie agreed to follow him in a short while and bring Lady Maud home.

When Lady Bromley heard of this, she shook her head disapprovingly, saying that young ladies nowa-

days were not prudent as they once were, and that in *her* maidenhood nothing could have induced her to visit a house where a young man lived that was paying her attention.

Archie, who was just quitting the room as the remark was uttered, turned back and muttered "that times had changed since the dark ages;" but the Countess coughed and cleared her throat so loudly that Lady Bromley fortunately failed to understand him.

It was quite a surprise to Lady Maud, however, when Lord Charleroy rode up to Floradene in a hired fly and entered the library, where they sat. Even Lady Thoresby had not expected him.

Lady Maud, who was laughing when he came into the room, froze, as if by magic, on sight of him. He went to her first and extended his hand, but she only gave him her finger-tips. He looked at her in surprise, but she would not meet his eyes. He glanced around him.

"No one seems pleased to see me," he said. And then, meeting Valerie's smile of welcome, he went up to her, telling her how pleased he was to see her back at Floradene again, and hoping that she would soon be fully recovered.

At this moment Lord Thoresby, who was a tall, well-built man of pleasant, if not handsome, features, came into the room, and, after greeting Lord Charleroy took the very seat by Lady Maud that Lord Charleroy himself had intended to appropriate.

Lady Maud, however, appeared delighted, and, piqued at her coldness, my lord threw himself down beside Valerie and made himself as agreeable as pos-

sible until Lord Dancourt, a short time later, arrived. Then Lady Thoresby, who had a superb voice, was asked to sing ; and they all repaired to the drawing-room, where, greatly against her will, Lord Charleroy succeeded in getting next to Lady Maud.

Still, she would not even look at him.

He made several attempts to engage in conversation with her, but she would only reply in monosyllables and then relapse into silence.

Finally he said to her :

"You are in one of your cruel moods to-day, Lady Maud. Perhaps I was foolish to expect it, but I imagined a different welcome from this. What have I done to you ?"

"Nothing—nothing, of course," she replied in innocent surprise. "What did you expect me to do?"

"Give me a smile, at least. You haven't even looked at me."

"Oh, is that it?" she exclaimed mildly, giving him a cold stare. "I never thought to *look* at you."

"That is worse," he said despairingly. "I was happy while away, be—"

"Then, why did you return?" she interrupted, without giving him a chance to complete his sentence. "I wouldn't live at a place that was so distasteful to me."

"Wait until I have finished," he said quietly. "I was happy because I believed I had left some one behind me that cared for me."

"I told you all along that Lady Thoresby was devoted to you," she replied, refusing to understand.

"No, not Lady Thoresby," he contradicted.

"Miss Thoresby, then. She is equally as fond of you," she said, shifting nervously in her chair.

“Do you know of any one else?” he asked entreatingly, mentally terming her heartless.

“No, there might be others—it was very likely,” she replied significantly, but she wasn’t acquainted with them.

Lord Charleroy was about to speak again, when the sudden appearance of the footman in the doorway caused him to look up and put an end to the words that he was about to say.

“A visitor, your ladyship,” it was announced; and the song which Lady Thoresby had begun, ceased abruptly. She wheeled around and rose to her feet just as Izma Alvarez crossed the threshold.

It was a surprise to all present, and a very disagreeable one to Lady Maud.

With the utmost composure, and a pleased smile that was quite sincere, Lady Thoresby hurried forward to meet her visitor, giving her the warmest welcome. She was looking rarely beautiful, even in her sober mourning garments. Fearing that she would not feel well enough acquainted, Lady Thoresby introduced her to each one separately, stopping at last at Lord Dancourt, who arose and offered her his chair.

She could not politely refuse it, neither could she object when he sat down beside her; but Archie saw that she was not pleased.

After a moment’s pause, she said to him in a chilling tone:

“I did not know that Lady Thoresby had visitors.”

“Have you never been to Floradene before?” he asked, hardly knowing how to reply to her remark.

“No; but I shall come again in future, as I like Lady Thoresby and her niece very much. I suppose

you"—giving him a sort of contemptuous glance—"are related to Lady Maud Dancourt and the rest of them at Merivale."

"Yes," he replied, reluctant for the first time in his life to admit it; "I am Lady Maud's brother."

"Ah, her brother!" she exclaimed in surprise. And Archie fancied that there was disappointment in her tone.

"Do you consider me unfortunate?" he asked, with a smile.

She turned and looked into his frank, handsome face. It seemed to win on her. She dropped her eyes and flushed slightly.

"I should not like to be a Dancourt," she replied with some hesitation.

"Yet your mother was a Dancourt," he reminded her.

"I am not likely to forget it," she retorted, flashing him a glance that was anything but tender. And as soon as she could conveniently do so, she excused herself and made her way to a seat by Valerie Thoresby's side.

But in spite of her evident dislike for his society, Archie could not keep his eyes off her. Although Lady Thoresby took the vacant seat beside him, and attempted to draw him into an animated conversation, his glance would rove now and then to the lovely face which in its brightest moments was touched by a pathetic sadness that caused his heart to go strangely out to her. He was sorry when the time came to leave. He felt that he could watch Izma Alvarez forever, and never grow tired of seeing the changing ex-

pression of those dark orbs, which were the first that had ever made his pulses beat faster.

Lady Maud, however, was quite ready to go, for the day had not been as agreeable to her as it might have been. She had succeeded in leading Lord Charleroy to believe that *whomever* it was that cared for him it was not *her*. She had wounded him with her coldness and indifference. She had amply had her revenge for all her imaginary wrongs; but she was not so happy over it, after all. Her heart was heavy when she parted with him; and he proudly forbore speaking a word to her. True, he politely followed her out to the steps and bowed to her when she was seated in the phaeton; but even Archie noticed that there was a coldness between them.

"What's up now?" he asked, looking into her troubled face, as he drove off towards Merivale. "I'll wager you have been quarrelling with Charleroy"

No, she hadn't.

"Then he has been quarrelling with you," he persisted.

This also Lady Maud disputed, striving hard to keep back the ready tears which were forcing their way to her eyes.

"You have offended Charleroy, at least," said Archie. "I could see that in his face. Women are capricious creatures"—bringing the whip down impatiently across the ponies' backs; "they don't seem to think a man has such a thing as a heart. You are a fool, Maud Dancourt, if you can't see that Lord Charleroy loves you"—bluntly.

"I am not such a fool as to think so," she replied in a choked voice.

“Oh, of course, have your way”—mimicking her ;
“I suppose mother has been talking to you—”

“And Lady Bromley,” she added, tears gushing to her eyes at last.

“Lady Bromley !” he exclaimed in disgust. “Good heavens ! Maud, I thought you had better sense.”

“But you do not know what she said. It must have been true.”

“I wouldn’t believe her on her oath,” Archie vehemently declared.

“It was about Lord Charleroy,” Lady Maud began weakly.

“Humph ! so I thought. What else ?”

Lady Maud repeated the very words that Lady Bromley had said, looking up at Archie when she had finished, for his confirmation.

“It is false !” he said indignantly. “If you listen to Lady Bromley, you will fall out with your best friend. Besides, there’s a scheme in it, Maud”—shrewdly ; “mark my word, if you don’t hear from the Duke of Ellesmere soon.”

“Do you really think so ?” she asked thoughtfully.

“I am sure of it,” he replied.

Lady Maud relapsed into pensive silence, which lasted until they were in sight of home. Then she looked up, saying :

“So you think, Archie, that Lord Charleroy isn’t so bad, after all.”

“Of course I do,” he replied. “Elwood never was a bad fellow, although at one time a little wild. If you love him, I would stick to him in spite of all the gossipers in Christendom ; but if you don’t watch

sharp, mother will marry you to some one else in spite of yourself."

"Have no fear of that," she said, smiling through her tears, with gratitude, and flinging her arms impulsively around his neck as he stopped the phaeton and assisted her to the ground. "I am not the sort of girl to be forced into a marriage. I shall marry the man I love, or no one ; and you shall stand at my wedding with the girl you like best, Archie dear."

He laughed, but the beautiful face of Izma Alvarez, with its glowing dark eyes and red lips, so tender to others, yet so scornful to him, came into his mind and subdued him. The girl he liked best would never stand with him, he thought,—less than all, at Lady Maud Dancourt's wedding.

But he said nothing of his thoughts ; and Lady Maud hurried to the house to give way to the first happy reflections that had come to her for weeks past.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

VALERIE THORESBY and Izma Alvarez became the best of friends as time passed, and scarcely a day found them apart. If Izma did not come to Floradene, Valerie would go to Lane Park, and Lady Thoresby, who had grown equally as fond of the young mistress of Lane Park as her niece herself, did not in the least object to it. Lord Charleroy too, and even Lord Thoresby, had taken a fancy to her, and were ever ready to welcome her in their midst.

Thus it became not uncommon for Lord Dancourt, who came to Floradene as often as ever, to meet Miss Alvarez here ; yet he never became better acquainted with her, and she was always cold to him, no matter how hard he strove to win a smile.

Lady Maud, however, was as proud as ever, and gradually her visits to Floradene grew farther and farther apart. When questioned as to why she came less often than had been her wont to do, she replied candidly that "she had no desire to become so well acquainted with Izma Alvarez."

Lady Thoresby regretted it ; but even if she had wished it so, Valerie could not have been persuaded to give up Izma for Lady Maud, although she did not dislike the latter.

Perhaps, too, the little coldness which had arisen between Lord Charleroy and Lady Maud had lasted longer than she expected, for he did not come to Merivale, and, though knowing that she was to blame for it, she was too proud to seek him, or let him know that she cared.

This did not prevent her from giving vent to her feelings, however, when in the seclusion of her own chamber ; and more than one night had she fallen asleep weeping bitter tears.

Why had she been so hasty ? She had led Lord Charleroy to believe that she did not care for him, and perhaps he would never seek her again. What if he should go away again and never come back to her ? The thought terrified her.

To the great relief of all concerned, Lady Bromley had taken her departure ; but the Countess began to notice that Lord Charleroy's visits to Merivale had

suddenly ceased, and that Lady Maud remained persistently away from Floradene. She suspected that something had gone wrong between them, and was exceedingly gratified, but she held her peace, having learned that this was the wisest course.

Archie had once remonstrated with Lady Maud, telling her that she had deeply wounded Lord Charleroy ; and that if she ever meant to be friends with him again, she should not hold herself so proudly aloof, as he was a stubborn sort of fellow, and not likely to intrude his attentions upon her if he believed them unwelcome.

But Lady Maud declared, with an angry flash of her eyes, that " he might go," and that " she wasn't in the habit of running after Lord Charleroy nor any other man." He might come back to her if he chose ; but one thing certain, *she* would never coax him nor plead with him to forgive her. She was innocent, anyway. What had she done ?

" Only shown him that you didn't care a fig for him," Lord Dancourt replied. But after this he offered no interference, as he knew it to be useless. He decided that it would be best to let them settle it between themselves as best they might, as Lady Maud was so obstinate she would have her own way in spite of all reason.

But while Lady Maud's visits to Floradene grew less, the regularity of his own became greater, and though he would have denied it if any one had rallied him on the subject, Izma Alvarez was the magnet that drew him thither. He was not easily discouraged, or he would have given up all hope of even winning the regard of one so bitter against him.

But he was hopelessly in love with her ; and though no one hinted such a thing to Izma herself, it was no secret to those at Floradene.

Valerie Thoresby, who was very fond of Archie in a friendly sort of way, regretted that Izma should treat him so coldly ; and one day when they were alone together at Floradene, and seated hand in hand on the terrace, beneath the spreading boughs of a shade-tree, she said to her :

“ You are the only person I ever saw, Izma, who did not like Archie Dancourt.”

A strange expression came into the large dark eyes.

“ Am I ?” she replied vaguely. “ I should think, then, that the change would be quite refreshing.”

“ But he is very sensitive,” persisted Valerie ; “ and I think your evident dislike for him pains him very much.”

Izma looked up quickly.

“ Why should it ?” she asked with slight surprise. “ What could he expect from Izma Alvarez ?”

“ But he is the best of all the Dancourts, I think. You might, at least, be kind to him.”

“ You must have a fancy for Lord Dancourt, yourself,” said Izma, with a smile, as she looked into Valerie’s earnest face.

“ I like him—that is all,” she confessed. “ What did you think of him before you knew he was a Dancourt ?”

Izma evidently winced at this pointed question.

“ I hardly think I had known enough of him to decide,” she replied.

“ But didn’t you think him handsome ?”

“ Not particularly so.”

Valerie sighed.

“I am sorry for this prejudice between yourself and the Dancourts,” she said: “we might enjoy ourselves so well together!”

“You cannot understand the depth of my hatred toward them,” Izma replied, with a passionate gleam in her eyes. “To save their lives, Valerie, I could not be friends with them. Never could I wrong the dead!” And then she hushed suddenly, as if fearing that she had already said too much; for it was a subject to which she seldom referred.

But after this it was noticeable that she was a little more polite, and sometimes slightly agreeable, to Lord Dancourt whenever they chanced to meet at Floradene; but he realized that he was gaining very slow upon her friendship, for never once did she invite him to Lane Park.

It was very disheartening, and Archie would call himself all sorts of unflattering names, swearing to-day that he would never look upon her face again and going to Floradene in the hope of meeting her to-morrow.

The Earl of Southwolde began to hear that the young mistress of Lane Park was a regular visitor at Floradene, and to notice how often his son went there of late, and his suspicions were at length aroused; yet he knew that Valerie Thoresby was still there, and he was in doubt as to whom might be the attraction.

It startled him to think of Lord Dancourt choosing unwisely; for time was swiftly passing,—their doom was drawing nigh,—and nothing had yet been done.

One day when Archie was passing his study, on his way to Floradene then, Lord Southwolde decided to

settle the question which had been disturbing him, and satisfy his mind ; so he called his son into the room, and, motioning him to be seated, said to him :

“ You seem to go to Floradene very often of late, Archie.”

“ Yes, quite often,” Lord Dancourt assented, looking somewhat surprised, yet having a slight premonition of what was coming.

“ I hear that Izma Alvarez frequently visits the place, too,” said the Earl, with a glance of inquiry.

“ I have heard as much, myself,” agreed Archie, taking a sudden interest in the paintings on the walls and longing to whistle.

“ Have you never met her there, my son ?”

“ Oh yes ”—mildly—“ one is liable to meet her there occasionally, you know.”

The Earl drew his chair up closer.

“ Do you like her ?” he asked.

Archie reddened in spite of himself.

“ There’s nothing about her to *dislike*,” he replied evasively.

“ But you remember when you first saw her you declared that you had fallen in love with her,” the Earl reminded him.

“ By Jove ! haven’t you forgotten that yet ?” he exclaimed, laughing dryly and mentally cursing himself for not keeping his mouth shut.

“ No, because my interest in it was greater than you imagined,” the Earl confessed. “ Do you know, Archie, it would please me if you should make Izma Alvarez your wife ?”

Lord Dancourt started and looked at his father in astonishment.

"You are surprised," he went on ; "but I owe the girl something for her mother's wrongs. I would gladly have her for the future countess of Southwolde."

"I suppose Miss Alvarez will have something to say to that herself," said Lord Dancourt, smiling grimly.

"Of course—we will allow for that," admitted the Earl, rubbing his hands together and waxing warmer in his eagerness. "But why don't you propose to her?"

"Propose to her the devil!" Lord Dancourt muttered, forgetting himself for the moment, the proposition seemed so absurd.

"What is that?" the Earl asked, failing to catch his meaning.

"Not if my head is level," Archie substituted.

"You will not!" exclaimed the Earl, disappointedly.

"No ; what's the use? I am not such a fool as to be refused if I can help it," he replied, rising to his feet and making a movement toward the door. "A man can't always have what he wants, and a woman won't always take what she can get ; so thereby hangs the tale of a rather wayward courtship. Izma Alvarez will never be *your* son's wife, my dear father : just make up your mind to that."

"Then why do you go to Floradene so often, where you are likely to meet her?" the Earl asked, vexed and disappointed.

Lord Dancourt had reached the door, but he stopped and studied a moment, after which he replied, inelegantly but truthfully, that it was "a confounded mystery."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MEASURE FOR MEASURE.

THE Earl of Southwold was unwilling to release all hopes of Izma Alvarez, even after this discouraging conversation with his son. Archie might be mistaken, he thought. Perhaps, with the belief of her dislike for the Dancourts in his mind, he only imagined that it would be impossible to win her for his wife. At all events, the Earl had undertaken to learn the truth, and he was determined to do so before despairing.

An idea had suddenly come to him. This thing had gone on long enough in doubt and darkness, he decided. He would go to Lane Park himself and learn what they had to expect from Izma Alvarez. He said nothing to his wife of this plan ; but the following morning he ordered the carriage and, without delay, was driven to Lane Park.

It was not without some trepidation, however, that he asked for Miss Alvarez when his ring was answered at the door. He was shown into the elegantly furnished drawing-room ; and with a nervous impatience that was unusual to him, he sat down and awaited the entrance of Lady Adelene Dancourt's daughter, whom he was to see for the first time. He did not know what he would say to her. The words that he had prepared were now all forgotten ; and when the door was pushed open by a small, white hand and Izma appeared on the threshold, hesitating for a moment and looking in to see whom it was that desired to see

her, he arose to his feet and stood for a moment silent, awed, and embarrassed by the presence of his dead sister's beautiful child.

She advanced into the room with a look of slight surprise on her exquisite face, the folds of her black gown sweeping behind her like a sable pall.

"You wished to see me, did you not?" she asked in her silvery, sweet voice.

"Yes ; you are Miss Alvarez, I presume," he said. She nodded.

"I am the Earl of Southwolde," he continued. "You know me by name if not by sight."

She started back from him, and the color died out of her cheeks. She threw her head back with a sort of defiant gesture, and, looking at him unflinchingly, said :

"What do you want of me, Lord Southwolde?"

He offered her a chair, replying :

"I have much to say to you. Will you be seated?"

"No, thank you, my lord," she declined coldly.

"I can listen to you quite as well standing."

This was very little encouragement to begin with, but the Earl had by this time recovered his composure and quietly seated himself, pretending not to notice Izma's disdain.

There was a moment's pause, and then he said :

"First, I desire to ask you a question. Will you answer it?"

"That depends entirely upon the nature of it, Lord Southwolde," she replied.

"Under any other circumstances, it might be considered rude to ask it, but I think you know how we

stand to each other. Will you tell me *why* you came to England and settled here, so near Merivale?"

"Every one has the right to suit themselves in such matters, my lord. It was nothing to me that Merivale should be near Lane Park," she retorted.

"But you had a reason," the Earl persisted.

Izma hesitated.

"Yes, if it will satisfy you to know that; I had a reason."

"But what I desire to know is, *why* did you come here?"

"I must decline to answer it. I cannot understand, Lord Southwolde, why you have come to Lane Park to question me thus. I deem the intrusion unpardonable."

"A man must take care of his own interests, Miss Alvarez," the Earl replied. "I have come to Lane Park in behalf of mine."

"Then I beg of you to be done with what you have to say as quickly as possible," she said with slight agitation.

"I will not detain you long," he promised. "It may not seem important to you, but it is to me. Tell me—I would like to know—are you fully acquainted with your father's affairs?" He leaned forward and looked at her closely. She drew back a little.

"Yes," she replied deliberately. "I was my father's only child and sole companion; and he kept no secrets from me—not even his business affairs."

"Ah!" said the Earl, with a long-drawn breath that seemed painful to him. "I suppose, then—it is quite probable that—ah—you know of the loan on Southwolde that was made through Renzo Alvarez's agents?"

"I do, Lord Southwolde ; and it was my father's dying regret that he had in any way assisted you."

The Earl laughed harshly.

"The money was a curse to me!" he exclaimed, running his fingers through his hair. "Renzo Alvarez might have known this and died in peace. If you knew a man to be trembling on the brink of ruin, and the disgrace of his downfall was more bitter than death to him, would you have any mercy on him? This is what I have come to you to learn, Izma Alvarez."

"In some cases—yes ; in others—no," she replied steadily.

The Earl drew another long breath and turned nervously in his chair.

"I might as well be candid with you," he said ; "for the truth cannot much longer be hidden. The mortgage on Southwolde will soon be due, and I cannot meet it. I have lost—I am ruined—and my only course now is to throw myself upon your mercy. What will you do?"

The admission shocked her. She fell back pale and silent, receding step by step until she reached the sofa, where, unconsciously, she dropped down and sat there staring at him and making no reply.

"What will you do, Miss Alvarez?" he repeated impatiently.

Still no reply.

He waited.

Suddenly her lips moved, and she broke into a discordant laugh.

"Mercy!" she exclaimed derisively, passing her

hand across her forehead. "Are you mad, Lord Southwolde, that you speak to *me* of mercy?"

"But if you will only wait with me," he said beseechingly. "If you will only bear with me a while, I may be able to save myself. I promise that you shall lose nothing."

She rose to her feet again; her black eyes were burning brightly.

"No!" she replied, her hands clenched tightly. "I will not wait with you. The very day that the mortgage is due, it shall be closed. Let come what may, I will keep my promise to the dead. At my father's dying bedside, I swore to avenge my mother's wrongs—I gave him my word that I would come to England and see that the loan upon Southwolde was not an hour overdue; and I mean that the oath shall be kept, my lord. And if the money is not forthcoming at the proper time, *you*, I think, will be the next of the Dan-courts to be banished from Merivale."

Lord Southwolde looked at her a moment, his hands tightly interlocked. Then he said slowly:

"So this is why you came to Lane Park, is it?"

"Yes," she acknowledged, "since the truth must be wrung from my lips. I came by a promise to the dead. Oh, my father!" she cried with a sudden gush of passion, as she raised her eyes to heaven and uplifted both her hands. "Even now I can see him as he lay upon his death-bed, his poor face pale and pinched, his wasted hand clasped closely about mine. I can see the ghostly candle-light and the sickly rays of the half-grown moon as they mingled across the couch; and I can hear his failing voice, striking to my anguished heart like a knife-blade:

“ ‘Izma, darling, I am going—going fast. Father is dying, my child. He will soon be with your angel mother, and my precious one will be all alone, except for Nurse Llorenta ; but even in death, my spirit shall watch over you. Izma, promise me one thing. You know that the money with which I unconsciously assisted the Earl of Southwolde has embittered the last days of my life. Oh, that a shilling of mine should ever have been loaned to a Southwolde ! Promise me, Izma, that you will go to England and close that mortgage on the very day that it expires. I will not rest in my grave until it is done. You are young—there are many years of both sunshine and shadows before you ; but swear that you will avenge your mother’s wrongs and mine. The old Earl that broke poor Adeline’s sensitive heart is dead, but his son and his children are still alive. They are all Dancourts—all enemies to your angel mother and me ; and my restless spirit will never know peace until they have atoned with their very heart’s blood for the death of my wife.’

“So with those words forever ringing in my ears, Lord Southwolde, do you think I could so far forget myself as to grant you a single day of mercy ?” she asked, taking several excited turns up and down the room. “No, no ! you must either be mad or think me a fool.”

The Earl shuddered. His face had grown very white. He rose to his feet ; and though Izma drew back from him, he went up to her and imprisoned both her hands in his own.

“Stop a moment,” he beseeched, looking down into her flushed, agitated face. “I will prove to you that

the Dancourts are no enemy to you. Listen ! I have a son, the noblest boy on earth—you have seen him—he is the future Earl of Southwolde, and the pride of my life. No man ever loved his son better, or had higher views for him ; yet gladly, willingly would I see *you* his wife.”

Izma gave a gasp of astonishment and shrank away from the Earl, all the color dying out of her face. She looked up at him with a strange, speechless expression in her eyes, that quickly came and was quickly gone.

“I realize that your mother was wronged, Izma,” he continued with real kindness ; “and thus would I atone by making her daughter Countess of Southwolde.”

Izma, recovering her self-control, snatched her hands away from him and drew herself up proudly.

“This is an insult, Lord Southwolde !” she indignantly exclaimed. “You would have your son make me his wife in order to save your estate ; and he, *noble* gentleman, would perhaps lend himself to the scheme ; but you would be greatly deceiving yourself to imagine that the title of ‘countess’ would have for Izma Alvarez the least charm. I would rather be a peasant girl than to be called by the name of Dancourt, my lord.”

“But you are mistaken about Archie,” the Earl replied quickly. “He does not even know of the mortgage on Southwolde.”

Izma smiled disbelievingly.

“That is a matter of indifference to me,” she said contemptuously. “Your desire to see me Lady Dancourt is more absurd than your hope that I would await your pleasure to redeem Southwolde. You can expect nothing from me, my lord,—nothing, nothing.”

“And this is your final decision,” said the Earl, in a

dull, hopeless voice. "You are very cruel and merciless for one so young."

She turned away; she could not look him in the eyes. He could not know how her own heart was bleeding even then.

"Perhaps I inherit it through the blood of the Dan-courts," she replied coldly.

The Earl shook his head.

"God help me!" he murmured. And then he turned his weary eyes toward the door.

"I suppose nothing will change you," he said hopelessly.

"No," she replied; "I will keep my oath."

The Earl turned away.

"Will you be merciful enough to keep my misfortune from the world until the time for exposure?" he asked, looking back.

"I will," she promised, to his surprise. "You need not fear, Lord Southwolde, that I shall take a mean advantage of you."

"Thank you," said the Earl, simply; and his face looked so piteously haggard as he went out, that Izma fell upon her knees with a remorseful cry. As she looked through the window, and watched the carriage as it bore Lord Southwolde away, a dark cloud suddenly obscured the sun, and, like a hideous shadow, seemed to settle down over Lane Park and follow the vehicle on its way. A dim foreboding of the gloomy future must have come to Izma, for she threw herself face downward on the pile of velvet carpet, crying in a husky voice:

"Father, father! why did you force me to take that oath? Heaven pity me! Even now I can hear the drip, drip of the blood of human hearts!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A CRUEL STAB.

IF Lady Maud Dancourt imagined that Lord Charle-roy was indifferent to or happy over the little coldness which had arisen between them, she had never been more mistaken in her life. If he did not give evidence of being the most miserable man in England, it was because his pride and stubbornness withheld him from making an open show of his feelings. If he had acknowledged the truth, he would have said that Lady Maud had never seemed dearer to him than now, and that the belief of her indifference to him had cost him more than one sleepless, unhappy night. He loved her—there was not a doubt of it in his mind; yet, when he had parted from her that day at Floradene, he had thought that he must give her up forever. There was no use in following her about and making a fool of himself; for if he should ask her to become his wife, she would only refuse him and laugh at him. He had presumed too far, perhaps, already; he would stay away from Merivale and let her see that he could live without her, and that she could not make a mock of his love.

This was his first decision, and he did indeed remain true to it several days, but he became more and more restless and unhappy, and the thought of living forever without Lady Maud became anything but pleasant. It was much harder than he imagined, and each day he looked and hoped for some little word

from her whom he loved, which would be an excuse to go back to her. He had held out so well now, and taken no step toward a reconciliation, that he rather dreaded to go to Merivale without the assurance of Lady Maud's readiness to forgive. And, besides, he had done nothing. She had only shown him that she did not care for him ; and thinking to please her, he had remained away.

But in spite of his reasoning, something in his heart told him that if he went to Merivale he would not be unwelcome ; and his longing to see Lady Maud again grew more intense each day.

The very shadow of an excuse was enough for him ; and when Lady Thoresby, perhaps suspecting the state of his heart, came to him one morning and asked him to go to Merivale for her memorandum, which she had forgotten and left there on her last visit, he could have joyfully embraced her.

"I will go," he said readily. And in less than a half-hour his horse had been saddled and he was on his way, his heart beating with love and hope. All his doubts were now forgotten. He was going to Lady Maud again, no matter how cold she had been to him ; and he felt sure that her proud lips would smile upon him and her deep blue eyes would droop as she gave him her soft, white hand.

One thing, too, he had resolved upon : He would risk his fate that very morning ; he would tell Lady Maud that he loved her,—although she must surely know this,—and he would ask her to become his wife.

How he longed to see her fair face flushed and her eyes filled with love for him.

When he reached Merivale, he looked around him.

He thought perchance he would see Lady Maud, but she was nowhere in sight. He continued his way to the house, and was shown into the drawing-room, but when he inquired for Lady Maud, he was informed, to his great disappointment, that she was not there. She had ridden off toward Merivale woods with Lord Dancourt, more than an hour ago.

Lord Charleroy was about to turn away when, remembering the mission upon which he had come, he asked for Lady Southwolde. She was at home, the servant said ; and bidding him to say to her that it was the master of Floradene who had come for Lady Thoresby's memorandum, Lord Charleroy settled himself down in a chair near the grate and gave vent to his disappointment by a groan, which caused the man who admitted him to look back over his shoulder in surprise.

Lady Southwolde was but a few moments in making her appearance. She was looking very serene, and the richly embroidered morning-gown she wore was quite becoming ; but even though she smiled upon him with unusual sweetness, and greeted him with pleasant words, Lord Charleroy somehow felt uneasy.

"Here is the memorandum, Elwood," she said, extending to him the little morrocco-bound book which she held in her hand. "I would have sent it to Lady Thoresby, but I myself had forgotten it. Pray ask her to pardon me. Lovely day, is it not? Won't you be seated awhile?"

"I—I had come to see Lady Maud," stammered Lord Charleroy, but resuming his chair. "I am sorry that I should have missed her."

"Yes," said the Countess, seating herself opposite him ; "but I am sure she did not expect you."

"Perhaps not," he assented, flushing slightly.

And then there was a pause in which Lord Charleroy grew very thoughtful. The Countess looked at him curiously. He seemed to have forgotten her presence.

"Is Miss Thoresby well?" she asked, desirous of breaking the silence.

"Quite well, thank you," he replied, gazing absently into the highly polished grate.

"Maud has been expecting a visit from her, I think," she continued ; "but perhaps she has forgotten us—I hear she has grown so fond of the mistress of Lane Park."

Lord Charleroy looked up into her face.

"She has not forgotten you, I am sure," he said ; "but maybe it is because Lady Maud never comes to Floradene."

"Why, I imagined Maud went to Floradene quite often," replied the Countess, in pretended surprise, telling the fib unblushingly.

"She does not, your ladyship, I assure you."

"Well, well, Maud has queer ways, Elwood. When you have known her long enough, you will learn that."

"She is the most charming girl I have ever met," said Lord Charleroy, calmly. "Lady Southwold, you must surely know that I love your daughter."

"Impossible !" exclaimed the Countess, looking at him in astonishment.

"Why impossible?" he asked earnestly. "I would consider her a blessing to any man ; and you have surely not forgotten, my lady, that the Earl gave her to me in her infancy. I confess that I am unworthy

of her ; but I have striven very hard to be a better man for her sake. I promise you, Lady Southwolde, that if I win her for my wife, she shall never be unhappy. I will shield her from the wintry winds as I would a tender hot-house flower."

He looked so eager and handsome, his dark eyes were so full of frankness and the passion of the first love of his life, that if the Countess had ever admired him, it was surely then ; but her mind was too intent upon a deeper purpose, to allow her admiration to get the better of her reason.

"I am truly astonished, Lord Charleroy," she said. "Although I have a dim recollection of some sort of a contract made between your father and my husband many years ago, I never dreamed that you would expect Maud to fulfil it ; for during all the time that you were absent from Floradene, you made no mention of it, and I was convinced that you either ignored or had forgotten it."

"I was not worthy to speak of it then," he confessed ; "but if I had forgotten the contract, Lady Southwolde, I could not have forgotten Lady Maud. I will not ask her to become my wife because the Earl gave her to me, but because I love her."

"Have you spoken to Maud ?" she asked.

"I came here to-day to offer myself," he replied ; "yet she knows already that I love her."

Lady Southwolde was not so certain of the latter, and she breathed an inward sigh of relief.

"I believe, Lord Charleroy, that you are mistaken," she said. "I think my daughter will be very much surprised if you ask her to marry you."

He looked up quickly. There was something in Lady Southwolde's face that alarmed him.

"I cannot be mistaken," he declared ; "for Lady Maud has given me reason to believe that she was not indifferent to me. Her eyes, if not her words, have told me so."

The Countess smiled incredulously and shook her head.

"That is very unlike Maud," she said. "I have never known her to encourage a suitor for the simple gratification of casting him off. I repeat, Lord Charleroy, that you must be mistaken. My daughter does not know that you love her."

"Then I will tell her so, in order that she may have no doubt of it," he replied rather warmly.

"I would not if I were you," advised the Countess. "It would be very unwise of you."

"What do you mean, Lady Southwolde?" he asked fearfully.

"I am sorry to pain you, Lord Charleroy—" began the Countess, hesitating and paling in spite of herself over the falsehood that she was about to utter.

"Go on," he bade impatiently, his heart beating with strangling throbs.

"You must not blame Maud," she continued ; "for we have never made her understand that the contract between the Earl and your father was binding. Although she has learned of it, she has never thought of it, I think, in a serious light ; so it was not strange that, when we took her to London last season, she should lose her heart before she returned to Merivale. You came back to Floradene too late, Lord Charleroy.

When Maud marries, the Duke of Ellesmere will be her choice."

It would have been far more merciful to have thrust a dagger to Lord Charleroy's heart. Pale, silent, and hopeless, he listened to the Countess as she drained from his veins the very life-blood. A chill seemed to pass over him. He shivered, and dragged himself to his feet. He looked at Lady Southwolde with such an expression of despair that for a moment she was tempted to retract the words which had scorched her lips to utter.

"I am sorry that I have come too late," he said in a husky voice. "It was very good of you, Lady Southwolde, to bring me to my senses"—with a mirthless laugh. "Of course—I should have known it—Lady Maud could not marry a fellow like me. I hope she'll be happy as the Duchess of Ellesmere—I do, upon my word. She deserves it. I was very foolish to presume upon her friendship; but she will soon forget it. Yes, yes, I hope she'll be happy; but she will of course as—the Duchess of Ellesmere." And again he laughed that mirthless laugh, which made the Countess shudder.

She offered her hand as he went out, but he did not see it. She watched him as he mounted his horse outside and rode madly away, his face pale as death, and her cruel heart smote her.

"I *had* to do it," she said in a husky whisper. "I had to part them, or lose Southwolde; and Maud will soon forget him. It was now or never. She will thank me for it by and by, when she is the honored and admired Duchess of Ellesmere."

CHAPTER XX.

PARTED.

FOR several days the falsehood with which she had stabbed Lord Charleroy's heart troubled Lady Southwolde greatly. She saw the heaviness of Lady Maud's eyes and noted the dark circles beneath them, and she knew that it was the traces of bitter tears and an unhappy heart, which ached with wounded pride and passionate love for the man from whom she had parted her; but though by a single word she could have united them, the knowledge of their desperate situation held her back.

The Earl had afterwards told her of his visit to Lane Park and the result of it; and she knew that her only hope lay in Lady Maud's marriage with the Duke of Ellesmere or some other gentleman of equal wealth. It was too late now. If she spoke out and told Lady Maud that Lord Charleroy had been to Merivale and asked her hand in marriage, Southwolde was surely lost. Anything was better than ruin and disgrace, the Countess argued; and though Lady Maud was unhappy at first, it was better to give up her love than to suffer the loss of their grand old estate. She had promised to help the Earl in his great trouble, and she would do it at any cost.

She was very tender to Lady Maud, for her conscience shamed her; and when the tears would start to the sad eyes, she would turn away, knowing in her heart that it was she who had robbed those beautiful

orbs of their lustre. It was hard to see the pain of the child she loved ; yet she believed that it was best so, and she could not undo it if she would.

A few days hence she had ceased to trouble, and and she felt that Providence itself was working into her hands.

One morning a letter came to her from Lady Bromley, saying that her nephew, the Duke of Ellesmere, was coming to Merivale the following week.

“He is as much in love with Lady Maud as ever, my dear Lady Southwolde,” Lady Bromley wrote. “You should have seen the look of joy that flashed in his eyes when I hinted to him that there was hope for him. I am convinced that he is going to Merivale for no other reason than to see your daughter and renew his proposal ; and it is my sincere hope that there will be wedding-bells at the little Gothic church of Southwolde before the Christmas chimes.”

The Countess felt that her joy was too great. She took the letter to the Earl ; and when he had read it, she saw tears of gratitude in his eyes.

“If Maud could only be persuaded to accept him,” he said ; “but what will she do about Lord Charleroy ? Shall we tell him the truth, and say to him that he must give her up to another ?”

The Countess had never told the falsehood by which she had parted Lord Charleroy from Lady Maud, even to her husband. She was ashamed to do so. She had said nothing of how things stood between them until now.

“Why, do you not notice, Robert, that Lord Charleroy never comes to Merivale now ? He and Maud have quarrelled. There is nothing between them. It

looks as if Elwood never desired her for his wife at all. Did he ever speak to you about it?"

"He did not," the Earl replied, perplexed over it for the first time.

"Then nothing stands in the way of Maud accepting the Duke if he proposes to her."

"But do you think she will do it?" asked the Earl, doubtfully.

"She must! If she does not, we are ruined."

"I hope she will; I pray she will, Lura," said Lord Southwolde, earnestly. "I will never cease to thank heaven for it. Everything has failed us; this is the last hope."

"It shall not fail us—I swear it!" declared the Countess, firmly, as she went out in search of Lady Maud.

This was her worst task. She shrank from telling Lady Maud that the Duke of Ellesmere was coming to Merivale, for she felt sure that her daughter would suspect her own hand in it; but she had accomplished too much now to turn back. She found her in the library, and, going up to her, pinched her pale cheek playfully, saying:

"My dear, there is quite a surprise in store for you. Can you imagine who is coming to Merivale?"

Lady Maud looked up languidly.

"No," she replied indifferently. "I cannot imagine—unless"—with a sudden displeased look—"Lady Bromley intends to return."

"Not Lady Bromley, but some one related to her," said the Countess, smiling.

Lady Maud glanced up in alarm.

"It can't be possible that—"

"There! I am sure you have it," interrupted the Countess, with a forced laugh. "You are going to say the Duke of Ellesmere."

Lady Maud rose to her feet with a look of indignation on her face.

"And why, will you tell me, is the Duke of Ellesmere coming here?"

"I don't think he has said," the Countess replied. "I received the information through a letter from Lady Bromley. He will be at Merivale next week."

"I certainly gave him credit for more sense," said Lady Maud, "yet"—clenching her lips to keep back the angry words—"I might have known it, when he is a nephew to Lady Bromley. Whom, pray, is he coming to see?"

"You, of course, my dear. Whom else *should* he desire to see. He is a lover after my own heart, Maud, I like to see a man who is not faint-hearted."

"Then I sincerely wish, mother, that some one who is as much in love with him as you are, would take him off my hands," said Lady Maud, with a mirthless laugh. "I despise the Duke of Ellesmere."

"Nonsense. Any other girl who was so greatly beloved by such a noble gentleman would feel flattered."

"Then I am glad that I am not 'any other girl.'"

"You are simply unreasonable. If the Duke should propose to you again and you were to refuse him, it would be the most foolish step of your life."

"I hardly think he will be so mad as to propose to me again, but if he does"—with an ominous look—"he will have to go farther than he did the first time to recover from the sting of my refusal."

"I dare say you will come to your senses," said

Lady Southwolde ; “but if you should mistreat the Duke of Ellesmere, you would greatly displease us all.”

“I hate him !” exclaimed Lady Maud, passionately.

“Yet you would give your heart to a man far less noble. It is time that such nonsense should come to an end, Maud. I have been more or less patient with you until now ; but you must give up all thoughts of Lord Charleroy. Has he not shown you that he cares nothing for you ?”

Tears that even her pride could not suppress started to Lady Maud’s eyes.

“I do not know,” she replied tremulously. “I wounded him and led him to believe that I did not care for him.”

“Bah ! If he loved you as he ought, he would allow no trifle to separate you.”

“But he is very proud, mother,” a large tear splashing down her cheek.

“Compare his conduct with the Duke’s,” said the Countess. “You refused the latter in plain words ; and he is coming back to you.”

“Lord Charleroy is a sensible man,” Lady Maud retorted.

“Have your way ; but I am satisfied that the time will come when you will see that you are mistaken.” And feeling assured of her words, the Countess was not discouraged.

A short time later, Lord Dancourt chanced to enter the room, and found Lady Maud alone, weeping and sobbing as if her heart would break. He went up to her and put his arms around her in his impulsive way.

“Maud, Maud ! what on earth is the matter ?” he

asked in astonishment. "Tell me who has done this, and, by all the gods, there shall be a reckoning between us!"

"The Duke—the Duke," was all that Lady Maud could sob out.

"The Duke! By George! I will be compelled to fight a duel with that man yet. It is only one of mother's freaks, my dear. I wouldn't mind her."

"But he is coming—actually coming—to Merivale," Lady Maud managed to articulate.

"Oh! so that's the way the wind blows, is it?" exclaimed Archie, in surprise. "Coming to Merivale!"

"He is—Lady Bromley wrote it; and he'll be here next week, and—and—"

"Mother wants to have a wedding ere long—is that it?" Archie finished.

"Yes, and everybody is against me, and—and I am wretched; that's all!"

"I wouldn't be if I were you."

"Then what would you do?" asked Lady Maud, desperately.

"I would make up with Lord Charleroy, and marry him on short notice—that's what. I would play the trump card, and foil every man and woman that was against me."

"O Archie, how can I?" exclaimed Lady Maud, in dismay.

"Don't know, I'm sure," he replied, diving his hands down into his pockets and looking thoughtful; "but if I were a woman, I bet I would manage it."

"I can't do it," declared Lady Maud, with a dry sob. "It is useless to talk to me. Lord Charleroy does not care for me, or he would have come back to me of his

own accord. If you loved a girl, Archie, would you allow a trifle to separate you?"

He couldn't say that he would.

"Then what have you to say of Lord Charleroy?" she asked.

Archie hesitated and pulled at his moustache vigorously.

"It looks rather dark," he admitted. "I begin to believe, Maud, that he is a fraud."

"Do you really think so?" she asked, disappointed in spite of her efforts to convince him.

"Yes, I do ; and I believe you were right. I wouldn't turn on my heel to win him back. He isn't worthy of your affections."

This was indeed worse than if Archie had not agreed with her ; but even with every one against Lord Charleroy, it was not enough to destroy the love in her heart. It was impossible for her to give up all thoughts of him.

"The Duke of Ellesmere might come," she said to herself ; "but it would avail him nothing. She would remain single so long as Lord Charleroy was single, and she would defy any one to marry her to man she did not love."

A few days later, Lady Thoresby came over to Merivale and said that Lord Charleroy was quite ill. The Countess was very uneasy during her visit, for fear that she would drop some word by which the fact that Lord Charleroy had been to Merivale would be betrayed to Lady Maud ; but, fortunately for herself, Lady Thoresby did not do so.

The Countess watched her daughter very closely during her stay ; but not by the movement of a single

muscle did Lady Maud show that Lord Charleroy's health was anything but a subject of indifference to her. The Countess was very much pleased at her behavior, and began to think that already she was learning the lesson of forgetfulness. She did not know how afterwards Lady Maud hurried out in the flower garden where her lover's interrupted wooing had begun, and watered the roses with her tears.

It was a bitter struggle between pride and love, but in the end love conquered. As Lady Maud sat there among the flowers, Lord Charleroy's handsome face, pale and reproachful, seemed to rise up before her, and a thought, which a week before she would have put from her with proud contempt, came to her mind.

Lord Charleroy was ill, and if he should die he would never know that she was sorry. Could she not tell him through a bouquet of fragrant blossoms, that she acknowledged her fault and regretted that she had wounded him? She could not say it in words, but surely he would understand; and if he had ever cared for her, he would forgive her. She remembered that he had admired the flowers she had sent Valerie, and it would be a test of his love to see what he would say in reply to them.

She would let no one know, for they were all against her; she would gather them with her own hands and send them secretly to Floradene.

Oh, what a change was this from the proud girl of a short while ago, who had declared that Lord Charleroy might go—she would never coax him back to her. But love had done it all. And love brought the light back to her eyes and made her heart beat with hope when she had gathered the flowers and stole back to her room,

where she wrote upon a slip of paper her own initials, "M. D.;" and burying it down in the heart of the bouquet, she ran for her maid and bade her to give the flowers to John, with her command that he was to carry them to Floradene at once. "And mind that you say nothing of this, Clotilde," she said; "and if John should be missed while he is gone, say that I have sent him on an errand, and I will make the excuse for him."

Clotilde nodded her assent and tripped out of the room and down the stairs; but no sooner had she reached the lower hall, than out came the Countess of Southwolde from the door of the library, meeting her face to face. It was unexpected to both of them. The maid looked frightened, and Lady Southwolde gave vent to an expression of surprise.

"Clotilde, where are you going with those flowers?" the latter asked.

If the girl had been quick-witted, she might have framed a reply that would not have betrayed Lady Maud; but she was naturally afraid of Lady Southwolde, and nothing but the plain truth at that moment appeared to her.

"They—they are to be sent to Floradene, my lady," she stammered.

Lady Southwolde's suspicions were at once aroused.

"Are you going to take them yourself?" she asked.

"I am to give them to John," she replied, seeing that concealment now was unnecessary.

"They are from Lady Maud, I presume?"

"I—I suppose so, my lady."

"Then give them to me," said the Countess, coming forward and taking the flowers from the trembling girl's

hands. "You may go to my room and assist my maid in hanging up the dresses that I tore down this morning; and I will deliver the bouquet to John."

Clotilde could not refuse to obey; and thus while Lady Maud, in her own room, was dreaming of her lover's happy pardon, the silent message of peace had fallen into relentless hands, and the harmless blossoms, which would indeed have made an aching heart glad, were slowly burning to ashes in the library grate. The Countess, with determined eyes, stood over the blaze and watched the last leaf as it melted away, saying over and over:

"It is best. We must save Southwolde at any cost."

Ah, pity it was that it should be at the cost of two loving hearts; for this day Lord Charleroy and Lady Maud were surely parted.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BITTER DREGS.

LADY THORESBY began to grow tired of Floradene, and business affairs were calling her husband home, but she could not leave until Lord Charleroy was better; and Valerie declared that she would not return to Scotland unless Izma Alvarez went with her. So with these obstacles, she could not name any definite time for her departure; yet she had promised her lord that her stay at Floradene should come to an end a few weeks hence.

Lord Charleroy had alarmed her by expressing his

intention of going abroad again as soon as he was able ; and she had refused to even listen to it, telling him that she would follow him thither, rather than see him go alone and perhaps fall into the ways of his old life.

"You *shall* not go, Elwood !" she declared. "I know the truth—you cannot hide it from me—you have quarrelled with Maud Dancourt, and desire to run away again and spoil your own life ; but I will see to it that you do not. I will wait until you are well ; and you shall go with us to Scotland, but never back to your old life—never !"

Lord Charleroy only turned wearily on his pillow.

"Anywhere—to Scotland, if you like," he said. "I am tired of Floradene."

Lady Thoresby looked at him half pityingly. He seemed broken down in both body and mind ; but she was determined not to show her sympathy.

"I suppose, then, you have entirely given up the idea of marrying Lady Maud," she said reprovingly.

"Yes, I have entirely given it up," he replied, with a bitter laugh.

"Regardless of father's dying wish," she added.

"I wish you wouldn't bother me, Rita," he said, with all the petulance of an invalid. "If Lady Maud chooses to marry some one else, we have no right to question her ; and if I choose to leave England and wander abroad, there's no one to be responsible for it but me."

"We will see about that, my lord," she replied, with a good-humored laugh. "I am going to take you under my charge ; just see if I don't. I've neglected you too much already."

But she could not help feeling incensed toward Lady

Maud, whom, she felt quite sure, was responsible for her brother's unhappiness. She believed too that his mind, more than any bodily affection, had caused his illness. Nothing would have given her greater pleasure than to have invited both Lady Maud and Lord Dan-court to accompany them back to Castle Lorna, their beautiful Scottish home; but under existing circumstances it would be folly to do so. Neither of them, of course, would go. She was equally as anxious, for Valerie's sake, to persuade Izma Alvarez to spend a while with her; and she went to Lane Park herself and extended the invitation.

Izma declared at first that it would be quite impossible—she could not leave England just now; but Valerie, who was present, became actually provoked at her refusal, and replied that it was because she did not want to go. She was all alone in that great big house, she said, and it was all nonsense saying that she could not leave it for awhile—Nurse Lorenta would take the best of care of it; and if she didn't come, she would never be forgiven. So Izma was almost forced to give her consent, and she was not sorry for it when she saw how glad it made Valerie. After all, she would not mind a rest away from Lane Park.

In the mean time, Lady Maud, who was looking each day for some message from Lord Charleroy, and grieving her very heart away because it did not come, knew nothing of Lady Thoresby's plans until the latter came to Merivale, herself, and unfolded them.

Lord Charleroy had improved rapidly for the last few days, and it had been decided that they should leave Floradene at once.

Never dreaming what a cruel blow she was dealing

Lady Maud, Lady Thoresby felt a sort of pleasure in telling her that Lord Charleroy was going with them to Castle Lorna, and did not know when he would ever come back. She might have seen the pallor that overspread the fair, proud face, if the Countess had not spoken and quickly drawn her attention away.

Oh, how the words sank into her heart!

Going away, perhaps never to come back, and he had sent her no message; he had treated her poor flowers with contempt. How terribly she had been mistaken! He did not wish to be friends with her; he had never cared for her. It was the same as if he had told her so in words.

For a moment the room seemed to spin round and round, Lady Thoresby's and the Countess's voices sounded far away, and the very air seemed to be stifling her; then, by a great effort, she rallied and looked up, pale but calm.

Lady Thoresby had turned her eyes again in her direction; and feeling that she was expected to speak, she said in a quiet tone:

"I am sorry that you are going home, Lady Thoresby. We shall miss you."

"I had hoped to take you with me to Castle Lorna, Maud," she replied, somehow feeling less angry with her than she had thought to be.

But the Countess spoke up quickly.

"She could not have gone, Rita, if she had made arrangements to do so," she said.

Lady Thoresby looked puzzled.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because she is expecting the Duke of Ellesmere at Merivale."

“ Ah ! ” said Lady Thoresby, beginning to comprehend the whole situation. “ Her lover—eh ? ”

“ You are mistaken,” Lady Maud began, flushing with anger more than confusion. But Lady Thoresby and the Countess joined in a laugh which drowned her voice ; and the former looked at her crimson face, saying to herself, “ False ! just as I imagined.”

She would not have thought so, however, if she could have seen Lady Maud in her own room after she had gone, how she threw herself face downward upon the hearth-rug, crushed and humiliated, weeping the most despairing tears that ever fell from a proud girl’s eyes.

Ah, how soon the ray of sunshine—the vain hope—which for a few days had brightened her eyes and cheered her heart, had changed to a dark shadow !

She felt that her whole life was blighted.

The man in whom she had placed her trust during all his waywardness, whom she had defended when all others were against him, had proven himself unworthy—he had acted like a coward ; and it seemed that she could never hold her head up before the world again.

Lady Thoresby, on her return from Merivale, made no mention to Lord Charleroy of Lady Maud or the Duke of Ellesmere, knowing that it would pain him ; but it seemed that the bitter dregs of the cup of despair were not to be spared him.

The day before their intended departure for Castle Lorna, Valerie rode over to Merivale to bid them all farewell, and she returned to Floradene seriously troubled. No sooner had she entered the house than she made her way to the sunny bay window of the

blue parlor where Lord Charleroy was sitting and dropping her hand upon his shoulder said to him :

“Elwood, I thought *you* were going to marry Lady Maud Dancourt.”

He started and looked up into her pretty face.

“What made you think so, Valerie?” he asked.

“What made me think so!” she exclaimed. “Why, any one would, I suppose, by the way at one time you were running after her; and then, Rita said you had been betrothed ever since you were—you were *babies*.”

Lord Charleroy smiled sadly.

“Perhaps we learned that our parents had made a mistake,” he replied.

“I don’t believe it,” she said, looking at him severely. “I am inclined to think that you are to blame for it; for Lady Maud looks changed and unhappy, and—”

“She cannot be unhappy, Valerie!” he interrupted eagerly, his heart giving a great bound.

“Well, she looks it, anyway,” Miss Thoresby declared; “and I don’t believe she is one bit pleased because the Duke of Ellesmere is coming to Merivale.”

“The Duke of Ellesmere!” exclaimed Lord Charleroy, in a hoarse whisper.

“Yes. That arouses you, I suppose; and if I were you, Elwood Charleroy, I would just see that he didn’t marry my sweetheart right out of my hands,” she said. “He’ll do it if you don’t mind; and the Countess will be a well-wisher to it. If I was a man I would be a man; and nothing would make me fight so hard as love.”

But notwithstanding Valerie’s advice, Lord Charleroy was convinced that there was no hope for him,

and the following day Floradene was locked up ; and with Lord and Lady Thoresby, Miss Thoresby, and Izma Alvarez he took his departure for Castle Lorna, thinking, in his heart, as he turned his back on the old place : “ I will never return here. Good-bye to Floradene forever. Farewell, my home, where I have lived the fairest sunshine and the darkest shadows of my life ! ”

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DUKE ARRIVES.

PERHAPS no one was more disturbed over the departure of their friends from the neighborhood, than Lord Dancourt. “ He couldn’t see the sense in it,” he declared. “ Any one might be content at Floradene ; but if Lady Thoresby was obliged to return to Castle Lorna, it was rather selfish in her, he thought, to take everybody else who would consent to accompany her.” “ Everybody else,” of course, meaning Izma Alvarez. It threw him into the worst of humors ; and he went about scolding for a whole day, saying a good many hard things about the whole party, and sparing no pains to upset the peace of the whole household. Not content with his tirade against Lady Thoresby, he finally attacked the Duke of Ellesmere, mimicking him ridiculously, to Lady Southwolde’s horror, in the presence of Lady Maud, calling him a “ curled darling ” with red locks, and avowing his intention of leaving Merivale and joining the Zulus if “ Allan ” was to be his brother-in-law-elect.

Lady Maud would have enjoyed this intensely if her heart had not been so heavy ; but she had the courage, at least, to smile approvingly, and the Countess became so indignant that she declared that the Earl should know of their insolence, and take them both in hand.

This state of things did not argue well for the Duke of Ellesmere's coming. If the Countess had not been so determined to carry her plan through, she would have been discouraged ; for she believed that Archie and Maud were colleagued against her. Lord Charle-roy's departure had been a great relief to her ; for while he was at Floradene, she had never felt safe.

No one could fully realize the bitterness in Lady Maud's heart. Valerie had been right : she *was* changed and unhappy ; and there was something in the expression of her eyes that mirrored the hopelessness of the soul within, yet she strove hard to conceal her misery, ashamed that any one should see her grief for a man whom she believed cared nothing for her.

With all the pride in her nature, she steeled her heart against him ; and often when the hot tears gushed to her eyes and her bosom would be stirred with a sharp feeling of resentment, she would say, "Is it my pride or my love that is most wounded ?"

She never ceased to dread the Duke of Ellesmere's coming. She could not tell why ; but there was a fear in her heart that the strength of her own will would forsake her. Archie, too, threatened daily to go away on the Duke's arrival ; and she felt that she would be helplessly alone. She knew her mother's intentions full well—if possible, she meant for her to be Duchess of Ellesmere.

"It shall never be—never, *never!*" she declared again and again. But the day that the Duke arrived and his card was brought up to her, she looked at it, and turned it over between her trembling fingers, paling and looking frightened in a manner that caused her maid to look at her in surprise. She was nervous, for she almost knew what his highness meant to say to her.

She took no interest in her toilet, for in her heart she hoped that the Duke would be displeased with her. She did not even glance at herself as she left her room and descended to the drawing-room.

The Duke was there; and Lady Maud was relieved to see that the Countess was with him. She looked at him coldly.

He was the same Duke of Ellesmere that he had been when she last saw him—there was no change: His short figure, which had always displeased her, was no taller; his sandy hair and beard, which Lord Dan-court was pleased to call "red," looked more offensive to Lady Maud than ever; and his blue eyes were quite as pale and expressionless as when he had bestowed upon her loving glances a season ago. Perhaps a year, added to his five and thirty, had made him the least bit older. At least, so thought Lady Maud as she advanced to meet him and he eagerly took her hand.

The Countess arose at once, and, after a few remarks left the two alone, regardless of Lady Maud's beseeching glances. But the latter was determined that if the Duke of Ellesmere had come to Merivale for the purpose of proposing to her again, he should not, if she could prevent it, speak out his mind. She

was so coldly polite to him that he did not have the courage to even hint of the desire in his heart ; and much sooner than he had intended, he took his leave, promising to call again, although he had received no invitation from Lady Maud.

The Countess was disappointed at the shortness of his call ; but she was not alarmed, for she had learned from the Duke's own lips that he had come to Merivale with the intention of winning Lady Maud for his wife if there was the glimmer of a hope for him, and that he would never return to London or his country seat until she had either accepted him or refused him again. Lady Southwolde had assured him that there was hope for him ; and when he had told her of his vast possessions, of his palatial mansions and superb family jewels, among the richest in all England, of which she had already heard, and told her that her daughter should be mistress of all these, she no longer had a regret for what she had done, but was only the more determined that Lady Maud should be the Duchess of Ellesmere.

The day that the Duke arrived, a letter came to Lord Dancourt from Castle Lorna, written by Lady Thoresby, cordially inviting him to join them in Scotland, as she was quite sure they would enjoy themselves better if he was only there. "I should have invited you beforehand, Archie," she wrote, "but I dreaded a refusal to my face ; and as Lady Maud had given me to understand that she could not accompany us to Castle Lorna, I feared that you would not come without her. I have thought it over, though, and I have come to the conclusion that you are only in the way at Merivale ; in fact, you must feel quite like an

orphan since the Duke of Ellesmere has arrived. Come up to Castle Lorna and I will be a mother to you, Elwood will be a brother, Valerie a sister, and Izma— Now don't refuse! There is such a scarcity of gentlemen up here that we are really in need of you. Come for a few days at least, and I will be, forever yours, Rita Thoresby."

Lord Dancourt laughed heartily over this quaint epistle, and Lady Thoresby was restored to favor at once; but he knew that the invitation alone to Castle Lorna had not stirred the foolish hope in his breast and caused his heart to beat with gladness. He read a portion of the letter aloud to his mother, but taking care that the portion containing Izma's name should be left out. The Countess was rather unwilling that he should accept the invitation; but opposition was nothing to him. Lady Maud besought him, with tears in her eyes, not to leave her; and even the Earl, for some reason, preferred that he should remain at home a while. But he was determined to go. Nothing could hold him back if the cars would carry him.

The tide of the wind would have been less hard to change than Lord Dancourt's mind when it was once made up; and heedless of any one's wishes except his own, he bade them a hasty farewell and left for Castle Lorna the following morning.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CASTLE LORNA.

CASTLE LORNA was a magnificent structure of solid rock, situated in sight of a picturesque bay on the east side of Scotland. It had been erected during the reign of James VII., a few years prior to the revolution, when William and Mary took possession of the throne. It had once belonged to a descendant of the Stuart princes, who had spent the greater part of his life there ; but it had afterwards been sold, and passed into the hands of the Glendower family, who were succeeded by distant kinsmen named Montrose, the latter being the ancestors of the present Lord Thoresby.

The place had been repaired or added to but little ; yet it bore its age well, and stood as firmly and grandly as when it had first been planted there. It was famed for the beauty of its surroundings, as well as the princely style of its ancient architecture. Its scenery, when viewed from the point of a quaint tower which occupied a dangerous rock in the northern area of the bay, was unequalled by anything in Scotland. The tower had been erected by one of the lords of Montrose, whose artistic love of beautiful scenery had prompted him to place it there. It was said that this had once served as his studio, where many superb creations of art had been placed upon canvas ; and even now, as a proof of it, a perfect scene of Castle Lorna hung on the wall of the little room at the top of

the tower, where Lord Montrose had left it when he died.

This picture had been viewed by many ; yet there were some who were afraid to venture to this dangerous point. As long as Lady Thoresby lived at Castle Lorna she could never be persuaded but once to go to the tower. She declared that once was enough for her to risk her life to see Lord Montrose's picture, and that for Castle Lorna itself, much less for a fine view of its scenery, she would never go there again ; nor would she permit of Valerie venturing there.

When Izma Alvarez had arrived at Castle Lorna, she was carried away with delight. She acknowledged it to be the grandest place she had ever seen in her life. She was content to sit at the window of her room all day and look across the beautiful waters of the bay, dreaming of the days of her childhood in sunny Spain, or watching the sea-gulls as they soared upward in the air, performing varied and graceful evolutions. She was glad that she had consented to come here. It was such a change from anything she had ever seen before ! It seemed to her that any one might find peace in a haven like this. Lady Thoresby had taken her over the castle and shown her every spot of beauty and interest, and Valerie had left nothing undone to make her happy ; yet, though she would have liked to have gone over to the tower and seen Lord Montrose's picture, of which she had heard so much, Lord Thoresby himself objected to it, saying that the tower had stood so long and the waves had beat against it so many years, that he did not consider it entirely safe. Lord Charleroy, however, avowed his determination of tak-

ing her over before she left Castle Lorna, if she was not afraid.

Izma seemed to forget all cares during the days that she was with her new friends; and Valerie was delighted at the way in which she joined in their merriment and laughter. Even Lord Thoresby, who was generally very grave, and seldom noticed any one, was charmed with her.

"She is the most winning child I ever saw, Rita," he said to his wife. And Lady Thoresby, who was never jealous, laughed, and replied that, if he was not careful, he would insult Izma's dignity by calling her a child.

Lord Charleroy was very little company for any one. He was gloomy and morose, and very different from his former self. Lady Thoresby chided him, but it did no good. He was wrapped up in his own trouble, and determined to take no interest in anything. For this reason, Lady Thoresby had sent for Lord Dancourt, knowing that Castle Lorna could not fail to be enlivened by his presence; but hardly hoping that he would come, she said nothing of this to any one but Lord Thoresby.

It was a surprise to all of them, particularly Izma, when Lord Dancourt arrived; yet he was welcomed by his host and hostess with none the less warmth. To his disappointment, Izma greeted him with her usual coldness, saying she had not expected that he would follow them to Castle Lorna.

Notwithstanding, they were thrown together much during the days that followed, for Captain Brunell, a young British officer, who had been in love with Valerie for more than a year, had come to Castle Lorna and

claimed her whole attention during his stay, and, as Lord Charleroy's society was not to be counted on, nothing was left Izma but to submit to the situation. And sometimes a foolish fancy would come to Archie, as he looked into the depths of her dark eyes, that his presence was not wholly distasteful to her; again, however, when she coldly repulsed him, he would believe that she indeed despised him.

Nevertheless, he grew more in love with her each day. If she spoke a kind word to him or gave him a smile, he lived upon it for days. To be with her was the greatest blessing he asked, even though she stabbed his heart with her coldness. He longed to tell her how dear she had become to him, but he dared not: he could not brave the words of scorn he feared she would utter.

Izma had learned one thing which she had not known before during her stay at Lane Park: Valerie had told her of the childhood betrothal which had existed between Lord Charleroy and Lady Maud Dan-court, and of the quarrel which had separated them (Valerie believed this); and Izma saw, with her own eyes, that something was wrong with Lord Charleroy, and knew instinctively that he was hopelessly in love with Lady Maud.

She wondered much over it. She had not liked Lady Maud,—who had impressed her as being heartless, haughty, and overbearing,—and she was surprised that Lord Charleroy should admire her. She decided, in her own mind, that, whatever had separated them, Lady Maud had been in fault. But she refrained from expressing her opinion, even to Valerie. It was

seldom that she could be brought to speak of the Dancourts at all.

One day Miss Thoresby, who, though occupied with her own love affair, had not failed to keep an eye on Izma and Lord Dancourt, said to her :

“I am glad that you are growing more friendly with Archie Dancourt, Izma. I wish you would fall in love with each other, and then we could have a double wedding. Wouldn't it be grand?” And she broke into a happy laugh at the thought of it.

But Izma looked horrified.

“You must be mad, Valerie!” she replied. “Never again speak to me of such a thing!”

“But I really should like it, Izma,” Valerie persisted. “You do not love any one else, do you?”

“No, no,” she replied quickly ; “but it would be a sin to marry Lord Dancourt.”

“A sin! O Izma!”

“It would, it would!” she declared vehemently, her beautiful face paling. “A sin to the dead. It is my duty to hate him.”

“Pshaw! that old prejudice again. I imagined that you were forgetting it,” said Valerie, impatiently.

“How can I forget it?” she exclaimed with a quick breath of pain.

“Lord Dancourt could easily teach you if you would allow it,” Valerie replied.

But this, instead of producing a change for the better, had the effect of making Izma more reserved than ever toward Archie ; and if he had ever despaired, it was surely now. He saw that he had come to Castle Lorna on a vain hope, and began to think of returning to Merivale.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A HAND, BUT NOT A HEART.

LADY MAUD had been unhappy enough before the Duke of Ellesmere's coming to Merivale ; but now she was doubly so. Her misery seemed to increase each day. Both the Earl and Countess declared that she must marry the Duke ; but still obstinate, self-willed, and determined, she emphatically refused. No amount of persuasion could turn her. She did not love the Duke of Ellesmere, and she would not marry him. If the whole world were to fall upon its knees before her, it would beseech in vain.

The Countess endeavored to arouse her resentment by referring to Lord Charleroy, saying that she would wed the Duke of Ellesmere to show him that she was not grieving over a slighted love ; but even this had no effect upon her.

The Duke called regularly ; and Lady Southwolde knew that the time was near at hand when he would ask for an acceptance or a refusal.

The Earl was alarmed.

The summer days were waning. Autumn, in all its majesty, was taking possession of its kingdom, and, with its royal sceptre, was touching the trees with its varied tints of red, gold, and brown. The swallows had already begun to fly southward, put to flight by the few signs of approaching winter, to build their nests anew ; and with sinking heart, Lord Southwolde saw time slipping from him, and knew that Lady Maud's accept-

ance of the Duke of Ellesmere was the only thing that stood between him and his doom.

He had been so sure at first that she could be persuaded ; but now the hope that had revived him seemed very frail. The Countess, however, bade him not be discouraged.

"I am not the woman to be outdone, Robert," she said firmly. "I have my heart in this matter, and Maud shall be the Duke of Ellesmere's wife."

But a few days later than this, she herself was startled at receiving a note from the Duke, saying he would be at Merivale that day for the last time unless Lady Maud accepted him. He was losing hope ; he was inclined to believe that she did not care for him.

Pale and trembling, the Countess sought her husband.

"Robert, the time has come," she said in a husky voice. "Maud must know all."

The Earl, who was sitting at his desk in his study, sprang to his feet.

"What do you mean?" he cried in alarm.

She placed the Duke's note in his hand.

"His highness is coming to-day to propose anew to Maud," she said. "If you do not tell her the truth, she will refuse him. Her pride and dread of disgrace is the only prop we now have to lean upon. If this fails us, Southwolde is lost."

The Earl paled, and threw himself back into his chair with a groan.

"My God!" he exclaimed miserably. "I thought never to let my children know."

"They must! it is the only chance. They must bear it, or the whole world will know. Tell Maud the

truth before the Duke arrives, and she will accept him ; if not, she will refuse him. I feel sure that she will not let Izma Alvarez ruin us. Robert, are you so weak as this? Send for her at once, and tell her all, this very morning?"

The Earl placed his hand over his eyes as if to shut out his misery. A moment, and he looked up into his wife's face again. Her eyes were full of dread. She was exerting herself to speak so calmly.

"Shall I ring for Maud?" she asked, placing her hand on the bell-rope.

He nodded, and she obeyed.

It was but a short time after the servant had answered the call, before Lady Maud appeared. She was looking quite pale and very unhappy ; but her pallor seemed to increase her loveliness. Her dress was of pure white merino, unrelieved by a single touch of color ; and as she paused in the doorway of the Earl's study and looked from one to the other with an inquiring glance, she appeared like some tall, perfectly moulded statue that had suddenly loomed up against a dark background.

Lady Southwolde's heart smote her.

What a shame to sell her beautiful daughter for gold ! yet she would make a peerless Duchess of Ellesmere. This was the thought that consoled the worldly minded Countess of Southwolde.

The Earl called her to him, and Lady Maud saw, to her surprise, that he was trembling. She seated herself on a hassock at his feet and placed her hands over his.

"Fâther, what is it you have to say to me?" she asked kindly. "You seem agitated."

The Countess came forward and stood beside her husband's chair.

"Your father is not well, my dear," she said. "You must not excite him. He wishes to speak to you about the Duke of Ellesmere."

Lady Maud looked up with an impatient glance.

"Wait until to-morrow, or some other time," she said with a sigh. "I am so tired of hearing about the Duke of Ellesmere."

She started to arise, but the Earl detained her.

"No, you must hear to-day, Maud," he replied. "The Duke will come to Merivale to-day for the last time, unless—"

"For the last time! Thank heaven!" she interrupted, with a sigh of great relief.

"But you do not know the danger that threatens us," said the Earl, with a distressed look on his face. "If the Duke leaves here without your promise to marry him, Maud, we are ruined."

An incredulous smile curved her lips.

"You are rather earnest, I think, father," she said. "Yet"—with an attempt at carelessness—"I am growing accustomed to it."

The Earl paled with apprehension. Would even the knowledge of their insolvency change her?

The Countess looked at her as she sat there, so fair and unsuspecting, at her father's feet, her beautiful eyes uplifted with that expression of reproach and mockery; and tears of emotion, which she turned away to conceal, rose to her eyes. She walked across the room and, reaching the door, said, without looking back:

"I will leave you together, Robert. Perhaps you can explain better when alone."

She heard Lady Maud utter something to her in surprise, but she pretended not to have heard her; and crossing the hall, she entered the library and threw herself down into a chair, panting:

"God help her to bear it!"

She closed her eyes and waited. She could not bear to return to the study until she knew that the Earl had told all. She had caused the child she loved much sorrow, but she had believed it for her own good, and this last cruel stab she had dreaded to deal her more than all.

She knew not how long she had sat there, when she heard a hoarse cry from Lady Maud's own lips. She did not move or attempt to go to her; she only moaned and opened her eyes, and then closed them again, clinching her lips between her teeth tightly.

Suddenly, however, the door of the library was flung open, and Lady Maud herself burst into the room. Her face was so white and drawn, and her eyes were so full of anguish, that the Countess held out her arms to her, with a pitying cry, as she had when she was a little child.

"My darling!" she exclaimed. And Lady Maud went to her and flung herself at her feet, crying:

"Mother! mother! tell me, is it true? Is there no help for me? Am I to give up the love that I would have carried with me to my grave, and marry the Duke of Ellesmere? Are we ruined? Is Southwold lost if I do not wed this man that I hate? Tell me, before I go mad!"

The Countess gathered her to her breast.

"It is all true," she replied, huskily ; " but it will not be so hard, Maud, if you will save us. You will soon learn to love—"

A harsh, wild laugh cut short her sentence.

"I shall soon die," she contradicted hysterically. "Oh, heaven, why am I called upon to bear so much? My heart! my heart! it is broken!" And with a wailing cry, she buried her face in her hands, and rocked herself to and fro, repeating over and over, "I shall soon die! I shall soon die!"

The Countess attempted to console her, telling her that, if she married the Duke of Ellesmere, her father's failure might, after all, prove a blessing. She would be one of the richest and most admired woman in England. She was quite sure she would never regret it. Afterwards, she would be glad that she listened to good advice and saved them from destruction.

But Lady Maud refused to be comforted. Her heart crushed, her pride humbled, she crouched there on the floor, all hope, all interest in her future life, dead.

The Countess, though pitying her with all the motherly love in her nature, did not forget that Southwold was at stake.

"Maud, you will surely save us!" she said beseechingly. "I think I should die if Izma Alvarez should take all we possess from us. It would kill me to witness her triumph. It would be a death-blow to us all."

"Give me time ; give me a little while to think," Lady Maud pleaded huskily.

But the Countess declared that there was no time

to spare, as the Duke would be at Merivale that very day to receive her answer.

Even as she spoke, there was a tap on the library door ; and as Lady Southwolde sprang to her feet and opened it, she was confronted by a servant who announced that the Duke of Ellesmere was in the drawing-room and desired to see Lady Maud.

The Countess turned back to her daughter with a pale, questioning face. Her countenance said plainly : “ Have mercy, and save us ! It is our last hope ! ”

The unhappy girl dragged herself to her feet. Her lips moved, but gave forth no sound. She started towards the door, but Lady Southwolde detained her.

“ Where are you going ? What will you do, Maud ? ” she asked.

“ I am going to the drawing-room to sell myself to the Duke of Ellesmere,” she replied bitterly.

“ But your hair is down and your face is pale. You will not go into his presence like that ? ”

“ I do not care. What does it matter ? My fate is fixed. I am to be the Duchess of Ellesmere,” and Lady Maud, with a mirthless laugh, as she brushed past the Countess, and, with unsteady step, made her way up the hall.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DESPERATE SITUATION.

It was the day before Lord Dancourt’s intended departure from Castle Lorna. He was going home—there was nothing for him in Scotland ; and only this

morning he had informed Lady Thoresby of the fact. His countenance had been very gloomy when he told her he would return to Merivale on the morrow, and she had besought him to remain longer, saying that the journey would be much more pleasant if he would wait until Izma was ready to return home, and accompany her. The temptation was great, but Archie was strong enough to resist it ; and in spite of all that Lady Thoresby could say, his mind remained unchanged. The days that he had spent at Castle Lorna had been more full of pain than any in his life ; yet he was loath to put them behind him. He knew that his love for Izma Alvarez was fruitless, but it was sweet to be near her, even though she repulsed him and caused his heart many a pang.

He had not the opportunity of speaking to her or telling her that this was his last day at Castle Lorna until late that afternoon, when, strolling down by the water's edge, in the vicinity of the tower, he came across her, sitting alone on a large rock and gazing dreamily out at sea. She made a pretty, unconscious picture as she half reclined there, with her elbow on the rock, and her dark head, from which her hat had fallen back, supported by one small hand, that looked snow-white against her raven tresses.

Lord Dancourt stopped and looked at her a moment before approaching, wondering what could be her thoughts. His shadow on the shins startled her, and she looked up to see him almost beside her.

"Ah! You?" she exclaimed. "I thought I was alone."

"You were until this moment," he replied.

"May I sit here beside you? This is my last day

at Castle Lorna. Perhaps"—with a smile that was more sad than glad—"the thought will help you to be kind to me."

He was never sure, but he fancied he saw her start.

She moved her skirts and made room for him, saying: "You may sit here if you like. Your decision to leave Castle Lorna is rather sudden, is it not?" indifferently.

"Not at all," he replied, flinging himself down almost at her feet and looking up into her face; "I have been thinking of it for days. I am not happy. I hardly know where I want to go or stay, Miss Alvarez. Like 'The Fugitive,'

" ' There is no quiet left in life,
Not any moment brings me rest:
Forever more, from shore to shore,
I bear about a laden breast.' "

Izma looked at him strangely. He could not understand the glance she gave him.

"You are homesick, Lord Dancourt," she said quietly.

"Never. I fear that it is worse than that," he replied, with a forced laugh, picking up the volume of "Meredith" that had slipped from her lap to the ground and lay there forgotten.

"Are you fond of Lord Lytton's poems?" turning the book over and opening it.

"When I am not dreaming of other things."

"Are you in a thoughtful mood to-day?"

"I think so; at least, I had forgotten 'Owen Meredith.' I might have left the book there, and the waves

would have carried it out to sea, if you had not discovered it."

"Do you find such pleasure in day-dreams?" he asked wonderingly.

"There is a sweet pain in them that satisfies me. They are my most faithful companions. If I had been born a poetess, Lord Dancourt, I should have lived alone for my work."

"And for whom do you live now?" The question sprung to his lips involuntarily.

A smile so sad that he longed to take her in his arms and comfort her, flitted over her beautiful face.

"For my mother and father in heaven, I think," she replied. "I live to join them there."

"Is it not a lonely thought?" asked Archie, thinking that it was rather a morbid view of life.

"It is a very joyous one to me. I have no other loved ones."

"But they are dead, you know," said Archie, devoutly wishing that her mind would dwell as lovingly on the living ones that cared for her.

"Dead to this world, but living in heaven. In my dreams, they are always full of the vigor of life and health."

Lord Dancourt, who had never thought much of death or stopped to form a theory of the world beyond, was rather surprised at her earnestness; yet in spite of himself, he was impressed with the manner in which she spoke. He somehow felt ashamed of his own life.

He did not look up, but turned the pages of the volume in his hand rapidly, and coming to these words suddenly, read aloud:

“ ‘ Be happy, child. The last wild words are spoken.
To-morrow, mine no more, the world will claim thee.
I blame thee not. But all my life is broken.
Of the brief Past, I have no single token.
Never in years to come my lips shall name thee—
Never, child, never ! ’ ”

Izma reached out and placed her hand across the page. He looked up into her face quickly, and saw that she had, without doubt, grown paler.

“ Don’t read those lines,” she said entreatingly.
“ They are too full of pain.”

“ Yet a farewell could not be otherwise than sad.”

She did not reply, but rose rather abruptly to her feet and shook out the folds of her black dress.

“ Are you going ? ” he asked, giving her a look of reproach.

“ The rock has ceased to be comfortable,” she replied evasively.

Lord Dancourt followed her example, and rose to his feet. She was silent for a moment, then, looking toward the tower, he said :

“ Lord Montrose must have been a queer sort of fellow. Have you ever been over to see his picture of Castle Lorna ? ”

“ No,” she replied, following his glance.

“ Are you afraid ? ”

“ Certainly not ; but I could hardly go alone.”

“ Should you like to see inside the tower ? ”

“ Very much.”

Lord Dancourt hesitated.

“ Suppose you let me take you over,” he suggested.

“ What ! this afternoon ? ” she exclaimed, in surprise.

“ Yes, why not ? ”

"It is growing late," she replied, looking around her.

"But it will not take us long. I can row you over and bring you back before the sun is fairly down. It is my last day at Castle Lorna, you know, and neither of us may ever have the chance of going to the tower again. Come!" he insisted, with his very heart in his eyes. "It is my first request, and perhaps the last that I will ever make of you."

If she had not been so unusually kind to him to-day he would hardly have dared to ask this of her, for her refusal would have been a certainty; but he saw her waver, and knew that the answer he desired was won.

"Are you sure that you will bring me back safely?" she asked, somehow unable to resist the magnetic influence of his eyes.

"Can you not trust me for so much?"

"I will try you this once," she consented, with a hesitating glance. "But"—suddenly—"will Lord Thoresby like it?"

"He will not know until we have safely returned; and then he can say nothing, except, perhaps, that it was rather venturesome."

"I shall not mind that," said Izma, with a smile, as she followed Lord Dancourt towards the spot where a small but firm row-boat was anchored.

He unfastened it, and assisted her to a seat, retaining her hand perhaps longer than was necessary. As he picked up the oars and rowed away from the shore, he looked into her lovely eyes, with a smile.

"It was very kind of you to come with me," he said.

"I do not agree with you," she replied, looking down into the water and dropping her hand carelessly

overboard. "I came to gratify my own desire. I have been longing to see inside the tower ever since I came to Castle Lorna."

"Then it was not to please me that you came."

"No," she replied honestly. "I should not have come for that alone—far from it."

Wounded and discouraged by this answer, Lord Dancourt relapsed into silence and did not speak again until the rock upon which the tower was situated was reached.

Izma too was silent, and amused herself by watching the ripples her fingers made in the water as she trailed them along by the side of the boat. If she knew that Archie's eyes were upon her, she made no sign of it.

When the boat slackened, she looked up. They were at the foot of the rock, and Izma gave a little shiver and cried :

"How large and tall it seems when we are near it!"

"Do you begin to feel frightened?" asked Archie.

"Not the least," she replied, rising to her feet; "yet"—looking up—"it is rather steep climbing."

"We will manage it," he said, rowing close up against the rock and fastening the chain attached to the boat around a projecting stone. "Many before us have reached the tower in safety."

But it was as Izma had said—it was rather steep and difficult climbing. Lord Dancourt held her hand tightly, as they made their way up the rugged steps; but several times when her foot would slip backwards, she gave a little startled scream and clung to him closer, half sorry, though not admitting it, that she had consented to come.

Once when she looked frightened, Archie laughed at her and asked her if her bravery had deserted her; and she drew away from him, saying that she could as well make the ascent alone. But he took her hand almost forcibly, bidding her to look back of her and see if she did not think a guide was necessary to insure her safety.

She obeyed; and the spot upon which they stood seemed so high and dangerous that she shuddered and scarcely breathed again until the tower door was reached.

"At last!" she exclaimed, with a sigh of relief. And Lord Dancourt stopped to wipe the perspiration from his brow.

"It *was* rather tiresome," he admitted. "I should not like to make the trip daily."

"But it is sublime up here, is it not?" she asked, looking around her in admiration.

"Yes, but not half so much so here, I should imagine, as at the top of the tower," he replied. "Come! we will see Lord Montrose's studio. Poor fellow! he must have had a hard time of it. I would as soon have thought of having a studio in the skies."

He gave the heavy door a jerk and opened it, and Izma followed him inside. Here it was hardly more than a vault with solid rock flooring; but a flight of steep, narrow, winding steps led them up into the top of the tower, which was all windows and light.

There was nothing here but the picture, which was large enough to cover almost one side of the wall; an odd-looking, old-fashioned easel of solid brass; and the stains of overturned oils and paints on the bare floor, which more than a century had not been suffi-

cient to wear away or wipe out. Yet the crimson sunset flooding the apartment and streaming like gold-dust across the superb scene of Castle Lorna made of it a place of beauty.

When Izma stood before the picture, she cried out in delight.

"It is perfect!" she exclaimed; "but why do they let it remain here?"

"In remembrance of Lord Montrose, I suppose," he said; "and because too the scene when viewed from this window is so like it."

He called her to him where he stood, and standing there together, in the glow of the dying sunset, they viewed the magnificent scene around them.

Izma for a few moments was awed into silence by its beauty.

"It is one of the grandest views in Scotland," said Archie.

"Yes, but any one might perish here and no one would be the wiser," she replied. "I should be afraid to come here often. It is more dangerous than I thought."

"Lord Montrose was brave enough to risk it," said Archie, with a smile.

"No matter, he was—what is that, Lord Dancourt?" Her sentence broke off abruptly. She leaned forward and looked out the window, down into the bay, intently, at a small object on the surface of the water that was rocking with the waves and drifting farther and farther from sight.

"Where?" he asked, for the moment seeing nothing.

She pointed to it, and he followed with his eyes the direction indicated.

“Upon my word, it looks like a boat!” he exclaimed excitedly.

“Yet there seems to be no one in it,” said Izma, straining her eyes to their utmost.

Archie gazed at it another moment in silence, then suddenly he started violently, and his face turned ghastly white.

Izma turned and looked at him, and they stared at each other, with a look of fear in their eyes. The same thought had struck them both. She reeled back a step and then looked out the window again at the little dark speck upon the water, clutching at her heart and breathing hoarsely.

“My God!” she exclaimed wildly. “What if it is *our* boat!”

“Heaven forbid!” said Archie, greatly agitated.

Izma clutched his arm in her excitement and glared at him despairingly.

“Did you not fasten the boat?” she asked huskily.

“Yes, yes, securely, I thought, but—but—it can’t be ours—of course not”—with a forced, mirthless laugh. “Don’t alarm yourself.”

“Go, see!” she commanded hoarsely. “I feel that it is our boat. Heaven help us!”

“I will,” he said; “but, pray, be calm. Have hope, at least until I return.”

He wheeled around and left her hurriedly, but while she crouched there alone beside the window, watching the little boat on the water as the waves rocked it from sight, watching the sun as it slowly disappeared, leaving the world in gloom and shadows, her suspense was terrible. A thousand doubts and horrors crowded into her brain.

What if she should die here? No one might ever know what became of her. Some day her bones might be found here, but that would be all. And Lord Dancourt,—would he die there with her? Could he escape? Had it been his fault if the boat was gone?

Then she thought of the Earl of Southwolde. If she perished here in the tower, his estate would be safe—there would be no one left to claim the mortgage that hung over him and would ruin him in the end. There would be no revenge that she had threatened. The Dancourts would be freed from the danger of disgrace and poverty forever.

She began to believe that it was a plot to get her out of the way; and as the minutes dragged by and lengthened into a half-hour, and Lord Dancourt did not return, she imagined that he had carried out the scheme, and left her there to her fate.

She paced the floor and wrung her hands in agony.

The tall picture of Castle Lorna against the wall looked grim and natural in the twilight; and she felt that she must fall upon her knees before it and call for aid.

The world without grew darker and darker; the light within the tower room grew dimmer by degrees. Another half-hour had passed and Izma was well-nigh distracted, when suddenly she heard a step on the stairs.

Her doubts melted, her heart leaped with joy. Lord Dancourt had returned for her.

She sprang toward the door to meet him; but when he appeared before her, his face was so pale and hopeless that she fell back, with a terrified cry.

“The boat!” was all she could exclaim ; for the wild beating of her heart almost strangled her.

Lord Dancourt looked at her pityingly, and, reaching out, took both her trembling hands.

“God help you, Izma,” he replied ; “the boat is gone!”

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW IT ENDED.

THE consternation was great at Castle Lorna that night when it was learned that Izma and Lord Dancourt were missing. House and grounds were thoroughly searched, but not a trace of them was to be found. No one had seen them together,—Valerie remembered that Izma had complained of a headache that afternoon, and gone to her room ; and Lady Thoresby had seen Archie leave the house and stroll out toward the bay,—but the natural conclusion was that they had gone away together. There could surely be but one explanation—they had eloped. Yet it was a mystery that they should steal away in this secret manner ; when the very hint of a marriage between them would have been hailed by each and all of them with joy.

Valerie, however, was less ready than the rest to credit an elopement ; for she had not forgotten Izma’s seeming dislike for Lord Dancourt, and how the very mention of her marriage with him had shocked her.

“Something is wrong,” she declared, tears streaming from her eyes. “Izma was not the girl to run

away like this ; and, besides, she wasn't in love with Archie Dancourt."

"You needn't be too sure of that," said Lady Thoresby. "Izma seldom spoke her thoughts and feelings. I am fully satisfied that it is an elopement. I dare say when we see Izma again, she will be Lady Dancourt."

Yet in spite of the conclusion, she was extremely uneasy, and did not sleep a wink all night. Valerie did not even lay her head upon her pillow, but sat through the whole night listening to every sound and praying that the lamp which she left burning in the window would guide Izma straight back to Castle Lorna, wherever she might be.

Not once did any of them think of the tower.

No dream came to them that Izma was there, miserable, forlorn, and hopeless, her very heart dead with despair. The moon-beams had never fallen upon a sadder picture than the one in the tower room that night.

Since Lord Dancourt had returned to Izma, saying that the boat was gone, and she had reeled away from him with a hopeless cry, and fallen upon her knees there by the window, she had not spoken. He had tried to plead with her ; he had entreated her not to blame him, saying that he had believed the boat securely fastened, and that, as God was his witness, it had not been his fault. It was the chain that had done the mischief—it had become unlinked, leaving the part around the rock behind it. But Izma was too miserable to reply or look up into his pale, beseeching face. With her head upon the window-sill and her face buried in her hands, she knelt there in

silence through the live-long night. And Archie—his face graver and paler than it had ever been in his life—stood with his back to the room, looking first upward at the blinking stars overhead and the silvery moon, which seemed to pity him in his distress, and then at the glimmering light afar, in Valerie's window at Castle Lorna.

He knew that they had been missed ere now, and wondered what they were saying of them. What would they think at Castle Lorna? how could their mysterious absence be explained? they would never know where to search for them; it might be months before any one would chance to come to the tower; it was quite probable that he and Izma would perish there together. He shuddered at the last thought and suppressed a groan. What a cruel death it would be for the girl that he would freely have given his own life to save!

If he only had a light to place in the tower window, he might have had hope of attracting the notice of some one at Castle Lorna; but there was no means about him of letting any one know that they were there. Their doom was fixed, he decided, almost at the very moment he saw that the boat was gone.

Not once during the night did he approach the forlorn figure at the window on the other side of the room or speak to her; for he knew that he could neither comfort her or give her hope. If she had disliked him before, what must be her feeling for him now? He knew that she must despise him.

Oh, how long and lonely the night seemed! The silence would have been deathlike if it had not been for the roaring and beating of the waves against the

mighty rock upon which the tower stood. A sob from Izma, too, would occasionally reach Archie's ears and almost madden him.

It was a night that neither of the two hopeless prisoners ever forgot. The long hours that Lord Dancourt stood there were painfully fatiguing; yet he was not aware of his bodily suffering—he knew nothing but the agony of his mind. He watched the night wear itself away.

“The half-moon melting out of the sky ;

And just to be seen still, a star here, a star there,

Faint high up in the heart of the heavens ; so high

And so faint, you can scarcely be sure that they are there.”

He saw the light in Valerie's window at Castle Lorna go out, shuddered at the darkness which preceded the first faint streaks of dawn, and then, with approaching daylight, a feeble hope stirred his heart. He breathed a sigh of gratitude that the night was gone, feeling that another such would drive him stark mad.

When daylight had burst full upon the earth and the tower room was once more freed from all traces of darkness, Izma raised her head and looked up with weary eyes, and Lord Dancourt approached her. She waved him back, but he heeded her not.

“Try to forgive me,” he pleaded, falling on his knees beside her, “and cheer up. There may be hope for us.”

But she shook her head and turned her eyes away.

“There is none for me,” she said huskily.

“But we may be saved—it is too soon to despair,” he persisted. “Izma, you blame me ; but I swear that I would give my life for yours. It pains me to

see you suffer. God knows I did not mean to cause you this."

"Oh, do not speak to me!" she begged.

"I must," he said passionately. "Izma—*darling*—we may die here together; but know this—that I loved you; that you were my very life." He had bent nearer to her, and she could almost feel the ardent gaze of his eyes. For a moment she seemed unable to resist him; she was pale and silent; then with a swift movement, she rose to her feet and drew back from him. He started to speak again, but she raised her hand with a silencing gesture.

"Hush!" she commanded hoarsely. "Do not insult me, Lord Dancourt, when I am here alone. I will not hear another word of this. I believed you a gentleman, if nothing else."

Stung to the quick, he turned from her.

"Pardon me," he said, bowing low; "I was indeed quite beside myself. I shall not refer to the subject again."

And this was the last word spoken between them until perhaps an hour later, when an excited cry from Izma's lips caused Archie to turn and hasten over to the window where she was standing.

"What is it?" he asked quickly.

She pointed down toward the water.

"Look!" she cried. "It is a rowboat, and some one is in it!"

"Thank God!" exclaimed Archie, fervently, seeing that she had spoken truly.

"But what if it should pass by and its occupant not see us," said Izma, apprehensively.

"It must not. It is yet some distance away. If

you will come quickly, we may be able to reach the foot of the rock before it passes. We can then call it to us. Come! If we lose this opportunity of escape, there may not be another thrown in our way." He spoke hastily and excitedly; and taking Izma by the hand, he hurried her out of the room and down the winding steps, and a few moments later they were standing outside the tower, where the most miserable night of their lifetime had been spent.

Izma breathed a sigh of relief. The open air seemed to put new life in her; and with but little assistance, she made a rapid descent. Archie himself had no regret at having the tower behind him, yet he felt in nowise safe to rescue until they were in sight of the boat again. When they had neared the foot of the rock, he saw, to his joy, that the man in the boat was rowing steadily towards them.

He shouted to him, and he looked up and saw them.

"We are saved," said Archie, joyfully, as the man nodded to him and rowed up against the rock; and Izma breathed a silent prayer of thankfulness to heaven.

She was very nearly exhausted, however, when Archie handed her into the boat and took his seat beside her. The man who tendered them his service was evidently a commoner,—apparently a Scottish fisherman,—as was shown by his dress and his corrupt dialect.

Archie explained to him how they had been detained at the tower "that morning" by their boat being swept away, and thanked him heartily if he would carry them to shore. The man readily consented; but when he asked at what point he should leave them off, Lord Dancourt looked blank for a moment and then

glanced at Izma, who was regarding him with a strange, half-fearful look in her eyes. Perhaps the same thought had flashed across their minds. What would be said and thought of their mysterious absence when they returned to Castle Lorna?

Izma, without doubt, turned a shade paler, and Archie looked extremely uneasy.

"Where are *you* going, old man?" he asked, by way of deferring his answer.

He replied that he had started to the rector's, a half-mile down the bay.

"The rector's!" exclaimed Archie, with a start. "Do you live there?"

No, he didn't live there, but he went to the place regularly to carry fish. He supplied the greater portion of the residents of this parish. He had often been to Castle Lorna.

Lord Dancourt glanced at Izma again.

Still she looked at him with that hunted expression in her eyes. He knew full well that the truth had suddenly dawned upon her. She realized that her good name was at stake. Her very lips were white, and he could see that she was trembling violently.

"Great heaven!" he thought, pitying her with all his heart, "what should he do?"

There was only one course—he knew it from the very start; yet he dreaded it for her sake. How she would despise him for this, yet he was innocent. He turned to her with a beseeching look.

"Will you go with me to the *rector's*, Izma?" he asked, striving to speak calmly.

She gasped and placed her hand to her heart. For

a moment she seemed incapable of replying ; but he saw that she understood. He bent nearer to her and continued in a low voice :

“It is hard upon you”—his lips twitching with pain—“but for your sake—believe me, it is best,” he broke off.

“That we go to the rector’s,” she said huskily.

“Yes, before returning to Castle Lorna.”

She raised her eyes to heaven and her lips moved ; she clasped her hands convulsively and moaned aloud. She seemed to forget the presence of the fisherman, whose eyes were fixed upon her in surprise.

“What shall I say ?” she cried intense tones. “I am helpless—helpless ! Better had I been left to die in the tower !”

Archie was wounded and distressed, but he concealed it as well as possible. He saw that Izma was too greatly agitated to make a wise decision ; and turning to the man before them, he said :

“Row us as far as you are going, and we will ask no more of you.”

Wondering, but in silence, he obeyed and launched out into the water. No word passed between Archie and Izma as they moved swiftly along. Both were very pale, and Lord Dancourt looked uneasy and nervous. Izma drew as far away from him as the boat would allow, and not once did she look towards him. Neither of them could have possibly been more miserable.

It was not long before they came in sight of the pretty cottage where the rector of the parish resided. It was situated some distance from the shore ; and just beyond it could be seen the steeples of the old chapel

which had stood steadfast and triumphant through many years.

As they neared the place, Archie glanced at Izma, and she chanced to look up for the first time and catch his eye. Her hands were clasped upon her lap, and she looked so piteously grieved that he could feel no harshness towards her. The oarsman's back was turned; and seeing that they were unnoticed, Archie placed his hand upon hers, saying bitterly: "Is the thought of becoming my wife such a terrible one to you?"

See shivered and drew away with a pained cry, murmuring something that sounded like "My oath! my oath to the dead!"

He did not understand her, but continued, as the boat touched shore: "See! we are here at last. Izma, speak quickly!"—entreatingly. "What have I done that you should hate me so? I did not wilfully bring this upon you; for never would I have spoiled your life by making you an unwilling bride. The reparation is for your sake, yet gladly would I make it. Will you come to the old chapel and have the rector marry us? Then can no one but ourselves know the truth or speak unjustly."

"You know that it is the only thing left me," she replied in a choked voice; "but remember all the days of your life that I was forced to this step."

"I shall not soon forget it," he said unhappily, rising and assisting her from the boat.

When they stood upon the ground he turned to the man beside him and thanked him for his service, dropping a crown into his hand and saying: "We are going over to the chapel. You will oblige us greatly

by sending the rector over there. Tell him that it is a couple who wish to be married, and to come at once."

Then, without waiting for the astonished man to recover his speech or question him, he turned away, and Izma, with downcast head, followed. When he was a short distance away, he stopped and waited until she was beside him, and they continued their steps toward the chapel in gloomy silence. Neither of them spoke until they were inside the churchyard, and then, when Izma drew a long breath, he asked her if she was tired, and she replied in a heart-sick tone that she was wearied unto death.

He took her arm and led her up the chapel steps. He tried the door, but it was locked ; and brushing away the gravel on the topmost step, he bade her be seated and rest until the rector came to wed them. He did not sit beside her, but wandered restlessly up and down the path that led to the gate, his head bent, his eyes upon the ground, and his hands clasped behind him.

No one, to have seen them, would have dreamed that they were waiting there to soon stand together at the altar.

Even the sun seemed undecided as to whether or not it should shine. By fits and starts it came out from under the clouds, and then rushed back and hid its face as if ashamed of its effort to show itself.

The time to both Izma and Archie seemed very long before the rector put in an appearance ; but he had, in truth, hastened to the chapel without a moment's delay. When Izma looked up and saw him coming up the walk, followed by two other men, whom she knew

at once were to stand as witnesses, and Lord Dancourt at his side, her heart gave a great bound and fluttered in her throat, and she raised her eyes to heaven, crying under her breath :

“Father, forgive me ! Do not blame me for the triumph of my enemy ! I am compelled to marry a Dancourt instead of keeping my oath. Free me, oh, free me from my promise !”

When the rector reached her side he offered her his hand and his follower bowed to her. The door of the chapel was unlocked, and as they stepped inside, the rector turned and joined the hands of Izma and Lord Dancourt, for the bride seemed to have forgotten to even take her bridegroom’s arm.

It was a dull marriage. The church itself was full of gloomy shadows ; for during the whole of the ceremony the sun refused to come out, and the shade upon the bride’s black dress made it look even blacker. Her face was very white, but not more solemn than her bridegroom’s, whose heart was filled with pain because he was taking to himself a loveless wife.

He could feel her hand tremble on his arm as she uttered the sacred marriage vows there in the presence of God and witnesses, and he knew that she shuddered to say the words that bound her to him for life ; yet in spite of all, there was a thrill of triumph in his breast when they turned from the altar and the thought came to him like a breath of honey that, for “better for worse, for weal or for woe,” the beautiful, beloved woman whom he led from the old chapel was his lawfully wedded wife.

CHAPTER XXVII.

UNCERTAINTY.

“WILL wonders never cease?”

Lady Thoresby looked up from the paper that she was reading, with a start and a look of surprise; and rising from her chair where she sat in the library, near the grate, at Castle Lorna, went over to the lounge where Valerie, in a fit of dejection, had thrown herself and was making a vain attempt to peruse a book. As Lady Thoresby spoke, she looked up and tossed the book aside, with a sigh of relief, raising herself on her elbow.

“What is it, Rita?” she asked with a look of interest. “Anything of Lord Dancourt and—”

“Nothing of the sort,” broke in Lady Thoresby. “I should be more grateful over the news if it was such. Read for yourself. Indeed, it is quite distressing, yet hardly more than I expected; although I had hoped to be mistaken.”

She gave the paper into Valerie’s hands, and she glanced at it.

“The London paper!” she commented, in surprise.

“Quite, true—Elwood receives it daily; but look at that.” Lady Thoresby indicated a paragraph near the top of the page, where was conspicuously printed these words:

Betrothed.—The Duke of Ellesmere and Lady Maud Dancourt, daughter of the Earl of Southwolde,

Valerie gave a cry of surprise and sprang up to a sitting posture."

"For shame!" she exclaimed. "I had believed better of Lady Maud, even though I had suspected this. I see the truth at last: She has basely deceived Elwood; and the quarrel was a mere trick to delude him."

"But we do not know the exact circumstances," said Lady Thoresby.

"Perhaps not, but the betrothal between Elwood and Lady Maud should have been as sacred as though they had made it themselves. Elwood loved her, I am quite sure."

"He did indeed," agreed Lady Thoresby, with a sigh of regret.

"And she is marrying the Duke of Ellesmere solely for his title and his money—I am convinced of that," said Valerie, decisively, as she glanced down again at the paper in her hand. "See, Rita! a whole column is devoted to the wealth and position of the Duke and the beauty and high connections of Lady Maud. It is a case of buy and sell, I would stake—"

"Well," as she hesitated, "what would you stake upon it, Valerie?"

"Captain Brunell," she replied, rising to her feet and walking over to the grate, where a low fire was burning. "Upon my word"—seriously—"I would do it and have no fear of losing him."

Lady Thoresby smiled in spite of her trouble.

"I dare say the Captain would not like the wager," she said. "Has Elwood seen this article?"

"I presume not. He hasn't been down this morning. There was no sleep for any one at Castle Lorna

last night. I am tired out, myself. I hardly know what to think of Izma"—gazing gloomily into the fire.

"It is very strange," confessed Lady Thoresby, the worried expression returning to her face. "I suppose you know that Lord Thoresby has gone out in search of them."

"Yes ; but will he find them ?" said Valerie, with a slight shrug of her shoulders. "Lord Dancourt was to leave Castle Lorna to-day—perhaps Izma has gone with him."

Lady Thoresby shook her head.

"That won't do, my dear," she replied. "Neither of them made the least preparation for a journey ; yet"—rather doubtfully—"if we hear nothing from them to-day, perhaps it will be best to telegraph to Merivale."

"I am convinced that something is seriously wrong, Rita."

"Don't say it, Valerie"—nervously ; "for if anything *has* happened to Izma, I shall in some way feel responsible for it, as she was here in my care."

"We can only wait, and try to be patient," said Valerie ; "but I never was the sort of person to bear suspense."

The opening of the door at that moment caused both to look up and cease speaking.

It was Lord Charleroy that entered.

"Good morning," he said, looking from one to the other. "Have you heard from the runaways ?"

"Not a word, Elwood," replied Lady Thoresby. "Isn't it dreadful ?"

“I have heard of worse things, sis, but I’ll admit that it is rather annoying.”

“Annoying! Only that, when none of us slept a wink all night,” reproved Valerie.

Lord Charleroy smiled and picked up the paper that Valerie, before his entrance, had thrown down. Lady Thoresby and her niece exchanged uneasy glances.

“It isn’t the first elopement that *I* ever heard of,” he replied, drawing his chair up near the fire and seating himself comfortably; “and besides, you know”—turning the paper over, and glancing down the columns—“‘What can’t be cured must be endured.’”

“Then you think they are really married,” said Lady Thoresby, hopefully.

“If they are not, they ought—yes, I’m quite sure they are married, Rita.”

“Then why don’t they return to Castle Lorna, my lord?” inquired Valerie, sarcastically.

“Perhaps they desire to spend a secret honeymoon, Val,” he replied absently, without raising his eyes from the paper.

“Then it is downright mean of them!” she exclaimed, striking her foot against the brass fender with such force as to cause both Lord Charleroy and Lady Thoresby to start.

“Pray calm yourself,” said Lord Charleroy, quietly.

“I won’t!” she retorted. “What’s the use in being calm, as you call it, when one is half distracted?”

“Don’t you see I am reading?”

“Don’t you see I am *talking*?” angrily.

“There!” said Lady Thoresby, rising and coming between them. “Let us walk out on the terrace,

Valerie, and watch for Lord Thoresby's return. He may bring us good news of Archie and Izma."

"Yes, for pity's sake let us go somewhere away from here," she consented, bestowing a withering glance upon Lord Charleroy, which was entirely wasted, as he was intent upon the news-columns again. Not content, however, at having her remark unnoticed, she looked back when she reached the door and added: "You are a perfect *bear*, Elwood Charleroy. You've never been like yourself since you were taken sick at Floradene."

Then "bang" went the door, catching the train of Lady Thoresby's skirt and compelling her to reopen it. As she did so, Lord Charleroy called to her, and she turned back into the room.

"I say, Rita, weddings seem to be quite thing at present," he remarked with bitter irony.

Lady Thoresby looked at him for a moment in surprise. His face was decidedly paler, and at first she could not understand. Then he held the paper out to her which he had been reading, and she started.

"Perhaps it will interest you to know that Lady Maud Dancourt is to be married to the Duke of Ellesmere," he said.

She looked at him for a moment with an expression of pity; then going up behind him, she bent over and dropped a tender kiss upon his forehead.

"I have seen it," she replied; "but I would not care, dear. She is false and unworthy of your love. Better for the Duke of Ellesmere to have her."

Lord Charleroy pushed her away, not roughly, but decidedly.

"I need no sympathy," he said in a stifled voice.
"She was never mine."

"But, Elwood—"

"No ; leave me now. I would rather be alone."

And knowing by the expression of his face that he meant it, Lady Thoresby went in silence, yet feeling that his heart was stabbed to the core.

It was indeed the most bitter moment of Lord Charleroy's life. True, he had been warned of it—he had expected it ; yet the pain was sharper than he had even imagined when it came.

It had been enough to hear from another's lips that Lady Maud would marry the Duke of Ellesmere ; but to see their names together in public print, to read her praises all for another man, to feel in his heart that she was selling herself for this man's princely fortune and his title, which he himself could never have given her, seemed more than he could bear. On the other hand, it gave him no comfort to think that perhaps for love alone she had chosen the Duke of Ellesmere. It was even worse then believing her false and shallow-hearted.

He had tried hard to resign himself to the situation ; but the lesson of endurance was the most difficult task that had ever been given him to learn.

He could not forget Lady Maud.

It had been easy enough to remain away from her and think of another winning her when there had been only a boyish fancy for her or his heart—when he had remembered her only as a beautiful child who had charmed him both as a sweetheart and playfellow in his youth ; but the passion of a man, the memory of

a fair woman, was not so easily lived down. Day and night the vision of her face was before him.

But now, he thought, she would soon be the Duchess of Ellesmere. How dare he think of her then! She would soon be the wife of another, with the fashionable world at her feet.

Floradene and its master, who had once presumed to win her, would only be remembered with the feeling of scorn that sometimes comes to us of the past.

Lord Charleroy sprang to his feet and paced the floor with agitated steps.

"Weak fool!" he cried contemptuously, striking his hands together. "A madman would surely have more reason than this. Why should I not forget her just as she has forgotten me? Why these sleepless nights and restless days for a woman who has never wasted a tender thought on me? Ha, ha! it is the way of the wiseacre. No wonder that he has never found favor in my lady's eyes."

So occupied was Lord Charleroy with his own trouble that he entirely forgot Izma and Lord Dancourt. He did not know how time was passing until suddenly he heard voices outside in the hall, and looking up at the clock he saw that it was exactly one hour past noon. He stopped and listened. The voices drew nearer, and the words spoken became more distinct. Several seemed endeavoring to be heard at once; but above them all, he recognized Valerie's tone.

"Married!" she gulped. "Just as they all suspected. But I wouldn't have thought it of *you*, Izma, when I pleaded with you, too, to—to—there; you needn't look at me with that warning glance"—tearfully—"it is no use now to conceal anything. I didn't

expect any better of Lord Dancourt ; but you—oh, it was too much to run away and frighten us all to death, and not let me, your *best* friend, know a thing about it !”

And then she gave way to her feelings, and her emotion spent itself in a violent burst of tears.

“The culprits at last !” said Lord Charleroy, with a sigh of relief ; and going to the door, he opened it and looked out.

Lord Dancourt, Izma, Lady Thoresby, and Valerie stood there in a little group in the hall. None of them looked very happy—not even the bride and bridegroom themselves. Lord Charleroy was surprised to see how pale Izma was, and there was not the shadow of a smile on her face. She looked extremely unlike the pleased and blushing young wife that one might have expected.

“Something wrong here,” was Lord Charleroy’s mental comment ; but refraining from thus expressing himself, he opened the door wide and blew out a prolonged whistle. Archie was the first to look towards him ; and as he caught the smile on Lord Charleroy’s face, he flushed consciously.

“It is true, Elwood,” Valerie sobbed out as soon as she obtained a glimpse of him. “They are *married*.”

“So I observe,” replied Lord Charleroy, dryly.

“But wasn’t it unkind of them ?” said Valerie.

“Very. But let the Benedict speak for himself. I say, Dancourt, how did it happen ?”

“Like all other marriages, I suppose,” replied Archie, a trifle stiffly.

“Of course it did,” Lady Thoresby spoke up, having just recovered her composure. “I think it very un-

kind of you not to congratulate them. I am gratified that it is no worse. They might have been dead—both of them.”

She did not dream how near death they had been ; but going up to Izma, she threw her arms around her and kissed her gladly.

“My dear, you are cold and trembling !” she exclaimed in surprise. “Come into the library and warm yourself. I wonder that we are so unthoughtful.” And saying this, she led her into the room, and wheeling a chair up near the fire, placed her in it.

Lord Dancourt and Valerie followed ; and Lord Charleroy turned back into the room, going up to Izma, with a smile, and extending his hand.

“May your life be long and prosperous, Lady Dancourt,” he said.

She started at the sound of the name, and tried hard to smile, but the attempt proved a failure.

“As for you, Dancourt,” he continued, turning to Archie, who was anything but his natural, light-hearted self, “you are the luckiest fellow on this side of the continent. Your life could not have a fairer prospect than with Izma Alvarez for your wife.”

“I am convinced of that,” said Archie, with more bitterness than warmth. And Valerie, who was watching them curiously, thought it very strange that Izma would not raise her eyes or return the beseeching glance he gave her.

What a constraint there was between them, she thought, forgetting in her wonder to further upbraid them. Lady Thoresby herself began to notice it ; but believed that embarrassment alone was the cause of Izma’s silence.

"You certainly stole a march on us, Archie," she said, laughing. "Why didn't you give us a hint of it? I hardly believe Izma herself knew that you were going to spirit her away."

Lord Dancourt laughed nervously.

"Well—er—it was rather sudden, you know," he replied.

"Ah! I see. You gained her consent all at once, and took her at her word"—with a roguish glance at Izma.

"Ye—es, something like that"—hesitatingly.

"How selfish of you to take her away from us!" with reproach.

"I really couldn't help it, Lady Thoresby," said Archie, so earnestly that they all laughed—except Izma, who each moment was growing more uncomfortable and distressed.

"But if you had only come back as soon as you were married, you might have saved us all this alarm," said Valerie.

"It was so late that we thought it best to wait until morning," Archie replied, with a dubious glance at his bride's averted face.

"Promise that you will not leave Castle Lorna for a long time, then; and I will forgive you," agreed Valerie.

Izma looked up, and rising to her feet, spoke for the first time.

"We cannot, Valerie," she said quickly. "Lord Dancourt had arranged to leave Castle Lorna to-day, and we must do so. If you will excuse me, I will go to my room and make preparations for my departure at once. My lord"—to Archie, who was regarding her

with something like amazement—"I will see you alone in the drawing-room an hour hence." And then, to the wonder of those present, she swept from the apartment, leaving Lord Dancourt in doubt as to whether he was mad or dreaming, or whether indeed Izma had decided to accompany him to Merivale as his wife.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IZMA'S DECISION.

It was not surprising that Lord Dancourt knew nothing of Izma's intentions for the future, as since their marriage at the old chapel that morning she had not spoken to him. They had returned to Castle Lorna in the rector's carryall, which he had kindly offered them; and all the way Izma had leaned back in the farthest corner of the seat, with her eyes averted and her lips tightly closed. Archie had glanced at her several times in the hope that she would relent and say something; but seeing that she had no intention of doing so, he settled himself comfortably and gave himself up to dissatisfactory thoughts. Thus they reached Castle Lorna—perhaps the most reserved pair that was ever newly wedded at the altar; yet in the heart of Lord Dancourt there was doubtless a faint hope that soon or later their future might be amicably settled. Izma was his wife—there was no disputing it—and he could not believe that she would entirely ignore this fact, even though the sacred tie had been forced upon her. Therefore, it was not strange

that he should be eager to hear what she would have to say to him.

Before the appointed hour was at hand, he was restlessly pacing the floor of the drawing-room, one moment wishing that he had never come to Castle Lorna, the next moment retracting it and feeling that no pain was too great to endure if he could only win the regard of the woman he had married.

He turned with a quick start when the door opened and Izma, very pale but with a determined look on her face, entered the room.

He placed a chair for her, and in silence she took it. He waited a moment for her to speak ; but as she seemed disinclined to do so, he seated himself opposite her and, after a slight pause, said :

“ You desired to speak to me, I believe.”

She looked up and gave him a cold glance.

“ I did, Lord Dancourt,” she replied, her fingers tightening around the arms of the chair. “ I think it best that we should understand each other.”

“ A very wise decision,” he assented, with a nod of his head.

“ This unfortunate marriage,” she continued deliberately, “ is of course to be regretted ; but since it has been forced upon us, the farce might as well be kept up—until we leave Castle Lorna.”

Archie started imperceptibly.

“ Until we leave Castle Lorna !” he repeated slowly. “ What do you intend to do then ?”

“ Go my own way, Lord Dancourt, the same as if the ceremony in the chapel this morning had never been performed.”

His heart gave a bound of disappointment, and the

hope that he had cherished died within his breast, but outwardly he was very calm.

"I should consider that a very unwise proceeding," he said. "The marriage cannot be kept a secret now, that every one at Castle Lorna knows of it. You might as well explain the whole truth before you leave here. There is no need of concealment from any one if we must part."

She looked at him half angrily.

"What is it to you?" she demanded. "You have accomplished your desire—you have saved Merivale by your strategem—what matters the rest of it?"

He looked at her blankly.

"I do not understand you," he said.

"Ha! do you not?" she laughed scornfully. "I pity your ignorance, indeed I do; but rest assured, my lord, that Izma Alvarez is not so blind that she does not see the trap she was caught in."

"What are you talking about?" he asked in a perplexed tone.

"Bah! Do you think I will condescend to explain, Lord Dancourt, when you know my meaning as well as I know it myself?"

"But I insist upon it," he persisted anxiously.

"Insist as much as you like," she retorted, with a shrug of her shoulders. "Your pretended ignorance does not deceive me. You came to Castle Lorna to carry out a scheme that you had planned for the redemption of Southwolde; and it has succeeded. I repeat that you should be satisfied."

Archie sprang to his feet.

"You must be mad!" he cried. "A scheme to re-

deem Southwolde! Lady Dancourt"—with an incredulous laugh—"you surely rave."

"Granted, then, that I rave," she replied coolly without raising her eyes to his face. "But, after all, this is not the point I came here to discuss: I wish to tell you of my plans, Lord Dancourt; so that there may be no awkward blunder." Here she rose to her feet and stood with her hand resting on the back of the chair. "I will leave Castle Lorna with you to-day—this evening; but I will return to *Lane Park*."

Archie stared at her but made no response.

"From there," she continued, "I will take my departure for Spain a few weeks hence. Thus, neither of us will be troubled with each other. We will not be inconvenienced by the fact that we are—husband and wife."

Archie had paled, but his voice was very quiet when he spoke.

"What will people say of this?" he asked.

"Anything they like," she replied. "I shall not be responsible."

"But I object to it, my lady," he said firmly.

"That will hardly prevent it," scornfully.

"For the sake of my own name, you shall not do this," he declared with considerable warmth. "Whether you despise me or not, Lady Dancourt, you must return with me to *Merivale*."

Izma drew herself up haughtily.

"What manner of force do you propose to use, my lord?" she asked derisively.

"I shall appeal to your reason," he said more calmly. "I do not mean to take you against your will."

"Perhaps not," she replied significantly. "It would be quite hazardous, I assure you."

Lord Dancourt strode up and down the room several times before speaking again. At length he stopped before her and said entreatingly :

"You are my wife, Izma. Why not make the best of it?"

He saw her start and quiver.

"There is no best," she replied, turning away from him. "I have already outraged the dead."

"Why must you always harp on the dead?" he exclaimed impatiently. "It is folly."

"We are wasting time," she said coldly, turning toward the door. "We must leave Castle Lorna by six."

Archie followed in her steps.

"You must not go until you have heard me," he said, reaching the door ahead of her and standing with his back against it. "I tell you we must not part when we have reached England. It will never do. You have allowed me to acknowledge you as my wife here at Castle Lorna ; and what will be said if we separate a few days hence ? It will cause a scandal, Lady Dancourt. You should be wise enough to see that."

He paused, but Izma was silent.

"I should not mind it for myself alone," he continued ; "but the name of those I love must not suffer. If you have any reason, you will come with me to Merivale."

"I have no reason in this, my lord," she replied stoutly.

"But listen to me," he pleaded. "I will not trouble you if you come. We may live apart the same as if

one roof did not shelter us. We will sometimes meet, but it will be as strangers. Our lives may be as separate as it pleases you ; but it is best that you should come to Merivale simply for the eyes of the world."

"Let me think," she replied huskily, leaving the door and walking over to the window. "Give me time to decide."

"As much as you like," he granted, looking at his watch. "It is yet three hours before we leave Castle Lorna." Saying this, he went over to the chair that he had left and reseated himself, leaning his head wearily on his hand and gazing gloomily down at the carpet.

For perhaps fifteen minutes the musical tick of the little buhl clock on the mantel was all that broke the silence. Archie had begun to grow restless, when Izma turned from the window and came towards him. She was very pale, and she seemed to be exerting herself to appear calm. She looked at him a moment without speaking, then her lips twitched, and the words she spoke seemed each to cost her a sharp pang.

"Under the consideration which you have named,—that we are to live apart,—I will go with you to Merivale," she said.

Archie rose to his feet and bowed stiffly.

"Thank you," he replied simply. And a moment later he was alone with his thoughts.

* * * * *

Six o'clock had chimed forth from every timepiece at Castle Lorna, and the carriage that was to bear Lord and Lady Dancourt away stood in readiness at the entrance. Valerie, who had forgiven Izma everything, had wept the whole of the afternoon, refusing

to assist with the packing, and saying that she would do nothing to help Izma away. She had pleaded that they remain "just one week longer;" but her request was of course not granted, and in tones that were hardly gentle she reproved Lord Dancourt for taking Izma from them.

Her grief burst out afresh when the time came for starting, and Izma herself, whose heart was sore, dropped a few tears on Valerie's shoulder when they bade each other farewell.

Lady Thoresby, and even Lord Thoresby, who had returned several hours before after a fruitless search, were sorry to part with the fair girl whom they had learned to love; for in their hearts they felt that she was not happy. There was a wistful look in her dark eyes that haunted them even after she was gone. They saw, too, that the color in her cheeks was not so bright as it had been; yet neither of them spoke of it, for both believed that perhaps it was only a fancy.

Lord Dancourt himself was more grave than usual; and as he handed his bride into the carriage and took his seat beside her, Valerie looked at them with the wonder she had felt once before. Were all brides and bridegrooms so cold to each other? would Captain Brunell be the same to her? she thought. If so, she felt that it would be impossible to enjoy her married life.

She watched them with tears in her eyes, as the carriage rolled from sight; and the last she saw of them was Izma's sweet face looking back through the window, with a sad smile.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A COLD RECEPTION.

LADY MAUD sat alone in her own room at Merivale, reflecting upon the painful events of the past. A short time ago she had been a happy, hopeful girl, free from all thought of sorrow ; and now she was the betrothed wife of the Duke of Ellesmere and the most miserable woman to be found anywhere.

Before the Christmas bells were chiming, she would be married to a man whom her very heart abhorred. It was enough, she thought, to drive her mad ; and sometimes she believed indeed that her reason was deserting her. It was after her meetings with her future husband that her heart cried out most to be freed from his bondage. Each time that he came to Merivale, the trial which she was forced to endure in not openly showing her dislike for him seemed greater than the last ; and she wondered what it would be when she came to spend her life with him.

But he had now returned to London for a while, and she would at least have a week's respite between each visit before the time that she was to stand with him at the altar. She was glad of this ; for even though his letters came to her each day, and she was compelled to sometimes answer them, it was far easier to endure than his wearisome presence.

She knew that their betrothal had been published ; and when bitter tears had sprung to her eyes at sight of it, she dashed them away, feeling a little thrill of

triumph, in spite of her pain, that Lord Charleroy, who had slighted her love, and Izma Alvarez, who had hoped to triumph over her, would see this column which told of the brilliant future that opened up before her. As much as she despised it, there was just the least consolation in this thought.

Yet soon enough her misery outweighed her triumph. Often she would declare to herself that she hated Elwood Charleroy ; but even as she said it, she knew she was speaking falsely. Believing him base and unworthy, she still loved him.

Sitting there in her room, with that pensive shadow upon her face, she thought how well these lines befitted her :

“ But bitter, bitter are the tears
Of her who slighted love bewails.
No hope her dreary prospect cheers,
No pleasing melancholy hails.
Hers are the pangs of wounded pride,
Of blasted hope, of withered joy.
The prop she leaned on pierced her side ;
The flame she fed burns to destroy.”

Would this mad passion in her breast ever die ? she thought. It must. She had betrothed herself to the Duke of Ellesmere ; he was to save Southwolde, and it was her duty to be true to him.

“ My dear, may I come in ? ”

Her mother's voice from the doorway interrupted her reflections ; and she looked up, with a start.

“ Of course,” she replied ; “ I am quite alone.”

Lady Southwolde had not looked better for years than she was looking now. The lines of care had vanished from her face, and the uneasy, unhappy expression had left her eyes. The dread of ruin was no

longer upon her ; her fear of poverty and disgrace had ceased to oppress her. They were saved, though at the cost of Lady Maud's happiness.

The latter, however, after the first terrible outburst of grief, had borne herself so well, and seemed so resigned to the fate in store for her, that the Countess seldom troubled herself as to whether it was a marriage of love or not, and even the Earl, who in the beginning had felt tempted to lose all rather than spoil the happiness of his daughter's future life, was now satisfied with the result that had been brought about.

"I have come to consult you about your *trousseau*, my love," said Lady Southwolde, drawing her chair up near Lady Maud's.

"But, mother, I have almost two months yet," objected Lady Maud, in a displeased tone.

"And what are two months for the preparations of as grand a wedding as the future Duchess of Ellesmere must have?" said the Countess. "I intend that the Duke shall not be ashamed of you."

But Lady Maud refused to take any part in it.

"Arrange it all yourself," she said. "Weddings are such tiresome things, it makes me ill to think of it. Have it over with as soon as you like—I shall not care."

The Countess was disappointed, but she thought best to humor Lady Maud. She rose to leave the room ; but as she moved toward the door, a knock on the outside startled her. She opened it, and upon the threshold stood a servant with a rather excited face.

"Your ladyship," she said quickly, "Lord Dan-court is in the drawing-room, with his wife."

Lady Southwolde retreated, with a little scream.

"His *wife*!" she exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

Lady Mand sprang to her feet and came to the door.

"What is it, mother?" she asked.

"Hear the girl," said the Countess, in a gasping voice. "I think she has gone mad."

"No, my lady; it is true," the girl persisted. "I saw her with my own eyes; and she is the prettiest creature I ever looked at. Lord Dancourt says: 'Tell mother I am here with my wife;' and I don't think there's any mistake, ma'am."

Lady Maud looked at her mother apprehensively.

"There must be something in it," she said. "Perhaps we had best go down."

"You may leave us," the Countess said to the servant. And as soon as the door had closed, she reeled to the nearest chair and sank into it, placing her hand to her heart. "What are we to think?" she gasped. "Who can it be?"

Lady Maud shook her head.

"It is hard to tell what freak has possessed Archie," she said. "Let us go to the drawing-room and meet them. It is the only way to satisfy ourselves."

But it was some time before the Countess could calm herself. The shock had unnerved her. It seemed incredible that her son should marry thus, without consulting any one. She was quite sure that he had chosen unwisely.

Neither the Countess or Lady Maud had any dream of whom the bride was. The former, in spite of her

distress, would not go down until she had put a few touches to her toilet.

The drawing-room was dark ; and when they first entered, they saw no one but Archie, who advanced to meet them with extended hand.

Lady Southwolde looked at him severely.

“How you have changed !” she exclaimed in surprise. “You look far worse than when you left Merivale. Have you been ill ?”

Lord Dancourt assured her that he had been quite well ; and looking toward the window, where a dark figure sat half concealed behind the heavy curtains, he said :

“Allow me to introduce you, mother and Maud, to Lady Dancourt, my—wife.” He seemed to hesitate over the latter word.

Izma rose to her feet and advanced a step towards them. The light through the parted curtains now fell upon her face ; and Lady Maud drew back with a startled cry.

“*Izma Alvarez !*” she exclaimed in amazement. “Great heaven ! is this your wife ?”

“It is,” replied Archie, with a warning look, which, however, did not suppress the gasp that fell from Lady Southwolde’s lips.

“My son—my son,” she began in horror, but another look from Lord Dancourt as black as night silenced her.

“This is Lady Dancourt,” he repeated in such a meaning tone that the Countess held out her trembling hand to her.

“It is indeed a—a surprise to us,” she said, entirely forgetting her well-bred composure.

"Is it possible!" replied Izma, coldly, a peculiar smile of scorn on her lips as she gave her the tips of her gloved fingers. "I had believed that you might be prepared for it."

"One is never prepared for a thing of this sort," said Lady Maud, significantly, recovering from her astonishment.

Izma looked at her for a moment closely, as if measuring her strength against hers; then she said, with a little nod which had a world of meaning in it:

"I believe that you and I have met before, Lady Maud. I am glad; for we can better understand each other."

Lord Dancourt, who saw an impending volcano in Lady Maud's eyes, at this moment came to the rescue.

"Where is father?" he asked in a curt tone that showed plainly his displeasure.

"He has gone to look after some of the tenantry," the Countess replied.

"Will he return soon?"

"Not until dark, I presume."

"Then I think Lady Dancourt had best be shown to her apartments," said Archie, firmly. "The journey from Castle Lorna has naturally wearied her."

The Countess knew what was expected of her; but she bit her lip with vexation, and hesitated.

"Mother, will you show Lady Dancourt to her rooms?" asked Archie, in a slightly raised voice.

Without replying, Lady Southwolde turned haughtily and bade Izma follow her.

CHAPTER XXX.

A DIARY LEAF.

THE Earl of Southwolde could not have been more astonished than when he returned to Merivale and learned that his son had married Izma Alvarez ; yet he was not so wroth as the Countess had expected. She believed that now, since Lady Maud was betrothed to the Duke of Ellesmere, and there was no longer danger of losing Southwolde, it would be greatly against his wishes to see the daughter of Renzo Alvarez Lord Dancourt's wife. And though it might have been less desirable to him than several weeks ago, he was very ready to send for Archie and grasp him by the hand.

"You have done well, my son," he said. "Izma will make a good Countess of Southwolde. Be kind to her and atone for your father's sin. Make her a worthy husband, Archie ; and don't mind what others say."

But when he saw the bitter smile that curved Lord Dancourt's lips, he looked at him in surprise.

"This marriage ought surely to make you happy," he said earnestly. "A man should be content if he weds the woman he loves."

"But if the woman he weds does not love him, father, it is hardly possible to know happiness," Archie replied. "Izma is my wife, but in name only. The marriage was much against her will."

"Explain yourself," bade the Earl, in astonishment. "How could you have married her against her will?"

Archie drew a prolonged sigh, and, seating himself, proceeded to relate the painful circumstances that had brought the marriage about. The Earl heard him through in wondering silence; and even after he had ceased speaking, it was several moments before the quiet was broken. Was it the Hand of Providence that had done this? Why was it? He thought of Lady Maud. Could it be to save her from an unhappy marriage with the Duke of Ellesmere?

"This is extraordinary," he said at length. "But why did she consent to come to Merivale? She cannot be indifferent to you."

Archie shook his head slowly.

"I besought her to come," he replied. "I did not wish the world to know."

"That was right," approved the Earl; "for perhaps in time all will be well."

"Never," said Archie, hopelessly. "She is too bitter against the Dancourts."

"Time can work wonders, my son. I will help you to make Merivale pleasant for her."

"Will you, father? It is very kind of you," said Archie, rising and grasping the Earl's hand, with gratitude. "If we could only make her know that the Dancourts are friends to her instead of enemies."

"If it was not for that other—has she told you of our misfortune?" the Earl asked suddenly, growing slightly nervous.

"What misfortune?" exclaimed Archie, in surprise.

"Why, about the loan and Southwolde, of course. You know—"

The door opened at that moment, and Lady Southwolde, who had been eager to come here for the last hour, thinking that something of which she was not aware was going on, entered the room, her curiosity at last having gained the victory.

“Ah!” she said, starting as if with surprise; “am I interrupting you?”

“No,” replied Archie, turning away. “We can as well speak of this”—to his father—“at another time.”

But he pondered much over the Earl's words. What did he mean? He could not understand; yet, placing Izma's strange words concerning Southwolde, and his father's, together, he decided that, whatever the mystery was, they had both spoken of the same thing. Something was wrong, he felt sure of it. He thought he would go the very next day and ask an explanation; but the Earl went out again and thus prevented it. Though he worried much, he was compelled to wait until an opportunity of speaking with him alone presented itself.

Izma was far from happy in her new position at Merivale. She wondered at herself the very day after her arrival, when she had awakened and found herself in the strange, elegant apartments that the Countess had assigned her, for allowing herself to be persuaded to come here. What a foolish step it had been, she thought. She could be nothing else but miserable.

She arose from her couch and going over to the window, parted the curtains and looked out at her beautiful surroundings. Never had she thought to put her foot inside of Merivale, where the old earl, that had disowned her mother had lived and died; never had she dreamed that she would sleep inside

the same walls that had once echoed with Lady Adelene's sweet girlish voice and laughter: and here she was, Lady Dancourt, the wife of the heir of Southwolde, and some day to be Countess of this vast estate.

She recoiled with a sharp cry as she thought of it. How different was this from the revenge that her dying father had planned for her, and which she had given her oath to take!

"Good heaven! what a wretch I am!" she cried, sinking to her knees and burying her face in filmy lace curtains. "Why have I done this? Why have I defied all and come here as the wife of Lord Dancourt, who married me to save the estate from ruin."

She could not account for her own madness. It seemed to her now that it was the rashest of all her life; yet she knew not whether to go or stay, since she had been foolish enough to come to Merivale. At first she thought she would send to Lane Park for Nurse Llorenta to come help her in her distress; but she dreaded the displeasure of the Countess of Southwolde, whose looks and tones had chilled her the evening before. Everything was so cold and strange about her that she trembled like a shrinking child, in fear.

Lady Maud could not have treated her with prouder indifference. The Earl, however, was wonderfully kind; and Lord Dancourt, though not loving, was very polite to her. It was evident that he meant to keep his promise—that they should live as strangers.

Her first day at Merivale was among the most unhappy she had ever spent, nor was the second or the third any better. She was left almost entirely alone;

yet she preferred this to the society of either the Countess or Lady Maud. Lady Maud made no pretence of concealing her dislike for her ; yet in spite of this, the more Izma saw of her the better she was impressed with her character. She saw that though she was cold and proud, there was not in her nature the least deceit or untruthfulness. She was exactly what she appeared to be, without either touch or finish.

Under other circumstances, they might have liked each other, but Lady Maud could not forget that through Izma had come the trouble that was to mar her whole life. If she had only waited with them, they might have saved Southwolde without sacrificing herself to the Duke of Ellesmere, she thought ; but now it was too late,—she was already betrothed, and could not break her word,—and after all, there had been no need of the sacrifice.

She was bitter against the woman whom she blamed of robbing her of her happiness. She did not want her at Merivale, and she took no pains to keep her in ignorance of the fact.

She had heard the circumstances of the marriage—for the Earl did not keep it from them ; she saw the breach between husband and wife, and for even this she censured Izma. The Countess too was inwardly indignant over the state of affairs. Even the servants, she declared to the Earl, would at length begin to talk. Was Archie mad that he had persuaded the girl to come to Merivale ?

Perhaps another fear was in Lady Southwolde's heart. Now that the marriage between Lord Dan-court and Izma Alvarez would save Southwolde, would Lady Maud keep her troth with the Duke of Elles-

mere? She dreaded to speak of it; yet the thought troubled her greatly.

Archie's marriage was a bitter disappointment to her; for all her scheming to save him from it had been in vain. Just when she was flushed with the hope of success, the blow had fallen, and she knew not how disastrously it would terminate. She felt that if Lady Maud now refused to be Duchess of Ellesmere, all desire in life would be at an end.

In the mean time, Izma's mind was not idle. Even this soon she began to think of leaving Merivale: for she saw that she could not bear this life. It was harder than she had thought, to live beneath the same roof with her husband, as strangers; and then, she could not endure the coldness of the Countess and Lady Maud.

She began to despise Merivale.

Her only pleasure was her long, solitary walks over the spacious grounds and through the woods, where, away from all prying eyes, her grief could spend itself.

One day as she had started from the house on one of these rambles, and was making her way toward the terrace, something white fluttered from an upper window and fell directly at her feet.

She stooped and picked it up, looking at it in some surprise. She saw it to be a closely written sheet, apparently torn from a diary.

She looked up at the window from whence the wind had fluttered it, and saw that it had come from Lady Maud's room.

She glanced at the paper again. It was written in a delicate, feminine hand, and instinctively Izma knew that it had been penned by Lady Maud. She started

to turn back into the house and restore it to its owner ; then, thinking of the coldness with which such an advance would be received, she decided to tear it up without reading it and scatter it to the winds. She was in the act of doing this when something—some impulse which she could not understand—seemed to hold her back. She hesitated, and looked at the writing again, and in this glance she saw the names of the Duke of Ellesmere and Lord Charleroy.

She could never tell what prompted her to read what was written there ; for it was wholly unlike her, as she was never inquisitive as to other people's affairs.

The page was dated several weeks back, and began thus :

“Oh, life, thou art bitter ! Nothing but sorrow, heartache, and despair.”

Izma looked up in astonishment.

Could this be from the proud Lady Maud ? she thought. She continued to read, and her amazement increased with each word.

“Heaven help me to bear my sorrow,” it ran. “Every hope, every aim in life is gone. My happiness was this day marred forever when I betrothed myself to the Duke of Ellesmere. Southwolde is saved, but my heart is broken. Oh, it was a cruel sacrifice ! Why was it thus ? Why was my love slighted by him that might have saved me ? Oh, the unhappy tears that I have shed for Elwood Charleroy ! How weak I am, how shameless, to weep for a man that does not care for me ; yet even now, as the promised wife of another, my foolish heart is aching with love for him. What a mockery it will be when I stand

at the altar a miserable, bartered bride. I wish I might die before then ; I wish I had died before I had lost my faith in *him* that I trusted. O, love, farewell ! This day must I bury you in the ashes of the dead past ; but how hard it is to give up all tender recollections and begin the new life. My heart grows faint and my limbs tremble when I think of the hollow position that I am to fill. Life—unhappy life—when will you end ?”

There it closed—this written page from Lady Maud Dancourt’s diary, which told of a most unhappy life—and Izma looked up with a quick breath and an involuntary sigh of pity, wondering if she was quite sure of what she had read.

Lady Maud *loved* Lord Charleroy. She was not the shallow, heartless girl that she had imagined her, Izma thought. But what had parted them ? Lord Charleroy believed her false to him, and she believed the same of him ; yet they both loved each other.

Izma stood there motionless.

How easy it would be for her to bring them together. There in her hand was the proof of Lady Maud’s love, and with her own eyes and ears she had learned the true state of Lord Charleroy’s heart while at Castle Lorna. If she went to either of them and told them the truth, it would be likely to reconcile them and amend the broken ties between them.

She stood there for a long while, thinking deeply. Could she so far forget Lady Maud’s coldness and unkindness and the past injury of the Dancourts as to return good for evil in this manner ? Having already broken her oath to her dying father, and suffered at

their hands instead of causing them to suffer, should she thus promote the happiness of any one of them?

She folded the paper and thrust it into her bosom, the old passionate anger flaming up in her heart.

"I shall not interfere," she said between her shut teeth. "Let her go to the altar an unhappy bride. It will be my revenge on *one* of them."

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN OUTRAGED LOVE.

LORD DANCOURT had been at Merivale several days before he learned of Lady Maud's betrothal to the Duke of Ellesmere. Every one taking it for granted that he knew, no one thought to tell him, until one day it chanced to be mentioned in his presence by Lady Southwolde. He was displeased, for never had he desired it; and going to the Earl, who for the first time since the day after his arrival was in his study alone, he said to him:

"Father, I wonder that you should encourage this marriage between Maud and the Duke of Ellesmere. I am quite sure she does not like him. Is it right to take away her happiness to secure for her position and wealth? You are positively selling her. If it was possible, I would prevent it. I am much opposed to these worldly marriages."

The Earl, who had been reading at his desk, wheeled around in his chair and looked into his son's earnest face.

"Of course you don't believe in them, and neither do I," he said abruptly ; "but when a man is ruined, he must do something to save himself. I considered it a blessing that the Duke wanted Maud for his wife. I did not then know that you were to marry Izma Alvarez. I had given up all hope."

"If you will explain to me the mystery that seems to be attached to everything you say," replied Archie, "perhaps I will understand you."

"It is strange that Izma did not tell you," said the Earl.

"She has spoken of something which I could not understand ; but she refused to believe that I did not know her meaning."

"Very natural, under the circumstances, I suppose," commented the Earl, clearing his throat. "She believed, of course, that I had told you."

"Yes—go on," said Lord Dancourt, impatiently.

The Earl could now with much greater ease than hitherto, when he had been in dread of utter ruin, relate the story of his imprudence and folly ; yet he could not look squarely in his son's honest eyes, which he knew were regarding him with amazement mingled with horror.

He told him all, just as he had told Lady Maud a few weeks before ; for he knew that concealment was no longer necessary.

When he had finished the story, he looked up and saw that Archie was pale as death.

"I never dreamed of this," he said hoarsely.

"But the danger is now all past, my son," said the Earl, complacently. "Why do you take it so to heart when there is no need of alarm?"

A discordant laugh burst from Lord Dancourt's lips.

"Good heaven, father!" he exclaimed. "It is simply robbing Izma Alvarez."

The Earl looked indignant.

"Is she not your wife?" he asked. "Will she not some day be sole mistress of the whole estate? And, besides, there is Maud. She will soon be Duchess of Ellesmere and able to repay every farthing of the mortgage, or double that amount if necessary."

Archie rose to his feet, with a determined flash in his eyes.

"Then she must do it, father," he said. "Lady Dancourt must either have Southwolde or the money that her father loaned."

The Earl sprang to his feet in astonishment.

"What do you mean?" he cried.

"You surely understood me. I do not intend to be indebted to the woman who believes that I wilfully forced her to become my wife.

"But, my son," said the Earl, in a startled tone. "She knows the circumstances of the marriage between you. She cannot blame you."

"Can she not?" exclaimed Lord Dancourt, with bitter sarcasm. "Perhaps if you had heard her on our wedding-day, your opinion would be slightly changed. She believes that the marriage was a plot—a plan—to save Southwolde. I could not understand her then, but"—angrily—"I see at last what a wretch she has thought me. My God!" he cried with sudden passion, "and this is all she has given me for my love! It would be just to *curse* her."

"But, Archie, is it not best to accept the situa-

tion?" coaxed the Earl, seeing how excited he had grown. "Izma is your wife, and Southwolde is already the same as hers."

"My wife!" he exclaimed with angry vehemence. "We would be better apart than to live such a lie as we are living. What a fool she must have thought me, to beseech her to come here!"

"You exaggerate matters," said the Earl, reseating himself.

"That would be impossible," replied Lord Dancourt, harshly, striding up and down the room. "What could be worse than the life I must lead with a loveless wife, who believed me base and contemptible? I persuaded her to come to Merivale; but I shall not persuade her to stay. By heaven! if I had known the truth, I would sooner have leaped from the tower into the bay at Castle Lorna than to have asked her to live, even before the world, as my wife. I will go to her and release her from her bondage. She may go from Merivale if she likes: I will not say aught to prevent it."

The Earl saw that he was past all reason. His face was white, his eyes were wild, and his lips bloodless. It was useless to remonstrate with him.

He started toward the door, and then the Earl could no longer be silent.

"Do nothing rash, Archie," he said. "You may regret it. Izma is only a woman."

But Lord Dancourt made no reply. He opened the door and slammed it behind him; and the Earl, feeling too uneasy to remain sitting where he was, rose from his chair and followed, never dreaming that there had been a startled listener to every word they uttered.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RELEASED.

THE Earl of Southwolde's study was perhaps as desirably situated as any room at Merivale. The tall windows overlooked the prettiest portion of the extensive grounds, and the gravel walk which led from the little balcony upon which they opened carried you straight into a diminutive flower-garden, where various blossoms lived and flourished all winter. In her long walks, Izma frequently left the house and returned this way, as she could conveniently reach her room by a door that led into a rarely used corridor. The habit was acquired by her distaste of meeting the Countess or Lady Maud when she returned or went out ; and it was thus that she made a discovery which opened her eyes and startled her beyond measure.

Her walk had been longer and more tiresome than usual. It was growing late when she returned to Merivale. The clouds looked gray and chilly, and the autumn gale tossed the dry leaves hither and thither, kissing Izma's fair cheeks, and coloring them like the heart of a crimson rose. She was almost breathless when she reached the little balcony upon which the windows of the Earl's study opened ; for all the way back she had walked hurriedly and faced the wind. With a long-drawn breath, she sank down on the steps and sat there for a moment's rest before entering the house and climbing the stairs that led to her room. But scarcely

had she seated herself, ere the sound of voices very near her reached her ears. She started, and looked around her in surprise.

She saw that one of the windows of the Earl's study was slightly raised, and through it she caught sight of a glowing fire and the forms of Lord Southwolde and her husband. It was from here that the voices came.

She started to her feet, but as she did so the sound of her own name fell upon her ears. She stopped and dropped down on the steps again, placing her hand over her fluttering heart. What were they saying of her? She felt that it was her right to know.

Every word between the Earl and Lord Dancourt was uttered loudly and distinctly. Izma could not fail to hear ; and a strange feeling, which she could not describe, came over her as she listened. Lord Dancourt was innocent—she could hardly credit her own ears : he had not known of the mortgage on Southwolde ; he had not married her to save the estate, there had been no plot, no design to entrap her ;—yet she had accused him of all this, and believed in his guilt. She heard his harsh, angry voice denouncing her, crying, “ And this is what she has given me for my love ! ” She looked through the window and saw his pale, passionate face and his wild, excited eyes as he strode up and down the room and she shrank back, trembling and cold, remorse and pity tugging at her heart-strings.

How cruel she had been ! and all the while he had been true and honorable ! How she must have wounded him ! yet he had borne it all and been kind to her. Did he really love her ?

The question startled her. She sprang to her feet, faint and dizzy, and staggered across the balcony. She went nearer the window and peered in, her heart beating wildly. She looked at the man whose name she bore and whose love she had outraged ; and she could not tell why the thought of his innocence pleased her. How enraged he was at the very thought of such baseness ! Had ever a man been so unjustly judged ?

He was a gentleman—noble and worthy—and he was her husband.

An odd sensation crept over her ; a thrill so sweet, so strange, that it almost took her breath away shot through her heart. Dazed, confused, uncertain, she turned away from the window and, admitting herself into the corridor, groped her way blindly up the stairway to her room.

But scarcely had she closed the door and thrown her hat and wrap aside, ere there was a knock on the outside, and she heard her maid calling to her.

“My lady, Lord Dancourt desires your presence in the library.”

Izma could hardly steady her voice as she replied, her heart was beating so excitedly.

“Say to him that I will be down at once,” she answered.

But for several minutes after the maid had turned away, she stood there, trembling, frightened, and dreading for the first time in her life to go into the presence of Lord Dancourt. At length she started toward the door, but, catching sight of her pale face in the mirror, turned back. He would be sure to see her agitation, she thought.

She glanced at herself again. Her whole appear-

ance displeased her ; yet it was the first time she had thought of this since she became Lord Dancourt's bride.

She went to her wardrobe and, pulling down a dress of handsome black velvet, hastily donned it. She then took from her jewelry-case a magnificent diamond crescent, which had been her father's gift before his death, and fastened it in the meshes of her dark hair. She was still pale, but a vigorous pinch on each cheek caused the color to rush back to them. She looked at herself with a half-scornful smile, knowing that the change had improved her, yet never dreaming how peerlessly beautiful she was. Her swanlike throat, rising from the folds of black velvet and lace, looked like sculptured marble, and her arms, bare to the elbow, were no less perfectly moulded or white.

She still trembled a little ; but wheeling around, with a fluttering sigh, she went from the room and, with unhesitating step, made her way towards the library.

The door was slightly ajar, and she saw by the flickering firelight on the walls that the lamps had not yet been lighted. She pushed the door wide open and looked in ; and again that same feeling which she had experienced as she peered into the Earl's study came over her.

Lord Dancourt was there alone, sitting near the grate, with his head bowed dejectedly in his hands. He did not hear her as she entered, so deep were his thoughts.

Izma approached him half timidly, and the *frou-frou* of her skirts caused him to look up with a start.

She stopped and hesitated, and he stared at her with an expression of wonder. Never before had he

seen her dressed like this. He had never dreamed of anything so beautiful. He almost forgot his pain in that moment of surprise.

His gaze embarrassed Izma. She looked down, then up again, and, flushing, laughed, a little, nervous laugh, saying:

“Did you not send for me, Lord Dancourt?”

Archie came back to his senses.

“Yes,” he replied coldly, “some time ago.”

She noticed that he did not spring up to offer her a chair as was his wont to do; but, with less formality than usual, she wheeled one near the grate and seated herself.

“How cold it is growing,” she said, with a little shiver, as she glanced through the window at the darkening clouds and held her white hands out before the fire.

Archie was silent; he did not even look at her as she said this.

After a moment's pause, she spoke again. “You do not seem well, Lord Dancourt.”

He smiled bitterly.

“I am sick at heart,” he replied. “Could a man have a worse disease, Lady Dancourt?” He glanced up into her face, and she moved uneasily. “I am tired of this life,” he continued with a sort of recklessness. “I could have endured it perhaps until to-day; I might have lived on in foolish hope if I had not learned the truth—the miserable truth.”

Here he stopped and gazed into the fire again, his head dropping forward to his breast.

“Do you know,” he went on after a moment, “I am sorry that I learned to-day—only to-day—how little

you thought of me—how base you believed me? I might have lived a long time with you near me, but now—I am sure we will be happier apart. Happy! Did I say happy, Lady Dancourt?" he exclaimed, bursting into a derisive laugh.

"How strangely you talk!" said Izma, swallowing the lump in her throat, which refused to stay down. "I never saw you like this before, Lord Dancourt."

"Perhaps you have never noticed my moods," he replied in that same bitter tone. "You know we have been very little together. Fate was very cruel to bring about that unfortunate marriage between us; but I have sent for you to tell you that you may leave Merivale if you like. I will not keep you in bondage here. I am sorry that I ever influenced you to come. And you shall either have Southwolde or the money that is due you, when the year has expired; you shall lose nothing, Lady Dancourt. You will not believe me, of course; but I did not know the truth until to-day. I did not know why you thought I had married you; but after this it is better to go our separate ways. I can never feel the same to you, and you—I know you will be glad to be free. You must have suffered much already, living so near a man for whom you felt nothing but contempt. I hope you will forgive me."

He looked at her so sadly and humbly that her eyes drooped and her lips quivered with pain.

"I—I do not want Southwolde or the money for which it was mortgaged," she said in a choked voice.

"But I prefer that you should have it," he replied. "I am not willing that you should suffer any loss. The Dancourts shall not injure you in this, if it lies in my power to prevent it. I wish that I could free you

from the name that is hateful to you ; but I cannot. If it was not for that, perhaps in time you might forget the unhappy marriage and the man to whom you are bound."

"No, no!" she cried, starting to her feet ; and then she dropped back, pale to the lips. "I—I—oh, do you wish me to go away?" she stammered.

"It is better," he replied huskily. "I have come to my senses. I cannot ask you to live here as the wife of a man whom you despise. It is such a lie, I hate it."

"You have ceased to care, then, even for the opinion of the world?" she said with strange eagerness.

"Yes. I was a fool to ever think of it."

She rose to her feet and stood with her hand resting on the low marble mantel. The color had again entirely deserted her face, leaving it sad, pained, and oddly wistful. The quick pulsation of her bosom gave sign of her inward agitation.

Archie raised his weary eyes and looked at her. She was at that moment gazing pensively into the grate ; and he never forgot the picture she made as she stood there in her black velvet robe, the firelight flickering over her graceful form and playing among the glittering diamonds in her raven hair.

Only heaven knew what the words he was saying cost him. Even now his heart, which an hour ago had been filled with rage, cried out for her.

At length she looked up and their eyes met.

"Do you desire me to leave Merivale at once?" she asked. "Of course I am hardly prepared to go away to-night."

"You know that I do not wish to drive you away,"

he said reproachfully. "I besought you to come here ; I am only now giving you your freedom."

"I was very rash for consenting to come here. I am sorry, Lord Dancourt, that I have troubled you thus long." She turned as she said this and started toward the door ; then she stopped and added : "Perhaps it will please your mother, and sister too, to know that another day will not find me at Merivale. I hope you will all be happier when I am gone."

Lord Dancourt did not answer her. He bowed his head between his hands again and did not look towards her.

She reached the door, and again she hesitated.

"What had come over her?" she thought. Had she not longed to be away from Merivale? Why were the tears so near the surface? Why was her heart beating with pain?

Impulsively she turned back and approached her husband's chair, dropping one hand lightly upon his shoulder.

"Shall we not part as friends?" she asked softly.

He pushed her hand away almost roughly.

"No ; do not torture me," he replied hoarsely. "A man cannot be friends with his wife. Hate me ! It is better than indifference."

She drew back as if he had struck her.

"Good-bye," she said simply ; and this time, without a backward glance, she went from the room.

Lord Dancourt heard the door close, and a groan of anguish burst from his lips.

"O God !" he cried. "How readily she accepted her freedom."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CUPID'S DART.

"Do nothing rash," the Earl had warned Lord Dan-court for the second time when he left him at the library door ; and he had calmed the anger in his heart and met Izma quietly—he had not upbraided or even reproached her—yet when she was gone and her gentle "good-bye" was ringing in his ears, he wondered if he had been too harsh with her. He remembered now that she had been very pale and her touch had been very kind as she placed her little hand on his shoulder. Had he said too much ? had he been too angry to know whether or not he was wounding her ?

Yet he had only offered her her freedom, he thought, and she had gladly accepted it ; he had only told her that she would be happier apart from him. But his heart was filled with remorse, misery, and despair.

Why had he told Izma to leave Merivale ? He did not want her to go ; she must stay ; she must not leave him ; he could not live if he did not sometimes see her beautiful face.

Thinking thus, he would start to the door and open it, saying that he would go to her and beseech her to forgive him and not go away ; and then he would remember of what she had accused him, of how base she had believed him, and how little she cared for him, and he would turn back, crying aloud in his pain.

All night he did not leave the library. No one came to disturb him, and in his unhappiness he did not know how swiftly the time was passing away. He

did not know when it was midnight, even though the clock on the mantel chimed forth the hour. Another day was at hand, another morning was slowly rising, before, tired out both bodily and mentally, he threw himself on the lounge and slept the sound sleep of exhaustion.

Izma had arranged to leave Merivale at sunrise, before any one in the house was astir, as she had no desire to bid either the Earl and Countess or Lady Maud farewell. The evening previous she had gone straight from the library and bidden her maid to have the carriage at the door to take her to Lane Park the following morning, as soon as the sun was up ; and during the night she had made all necessary preparations for taking her leave. Lord Dancourt had told her that it was better for her to leave Merivale, and she was too proud to stay an hour longer than it was possible for her to get away ; yet down deep in her heart she did not blame him, for she knew she had been cruel and unjust.

“He was right—it is best that we part,” she kept saying over and over ; and though her voice choked in her throat and a few tears fell from her eyes, she thought it was because she was so tired of the burden of life, and because she was so lonely.

She had made up her mind to leave England at once, for there was nothing to keep her here now. She would return to Spain, where she had lived a life of sunshine until her father’s death ; and perhaps there, with good nurse Llorenta, she would forget the pain that had crept into her life. What, after all, had her coming to England profited her ? Better had she utterly failed in her promise to her father than to have

come to Lane Park and embittered her whole life, all to no purpose.

At sunrise that morning, Izma looked out her window and saw that the carriage was waiting for her below. She had been dressed and ready for a half-hour ; and without even a hasty glance of regret around her she made her way from the room. But as she was passing the library, the recollection of what had taken place there the evening before caused a pang to shoot through her heart. Her husband's unhappy face rose up before her, and looked at her with that same sad, reproachful glance that yesterday had caused her pulses to beat faster. A strange desire to look into the room again for the last time impelled her to open the door noiselessly and enter.

The moment she stepped inside, however, she started back, with a stifled cry of astonishment.

Lord Dancourt was there on the lounge before her, sound asleep. One arm was flung above his head, the other hung limply beside him. His face was very pale, and dark circles underlined his heavy lashes. He looked as if he suffered, even in his slumber.

Izma hated herself for the tears that sprung to her eyes ; but she could not force them back.

How tired and careworn he looked ! Could she help but pity him ? He was her husband, and very handsome, too, as he lay there unconscious of her steady gaze, and perhaps this was the last time she would ever see him.

How strangely they were united—husband and wife, yet as far apart as if the grave lay between them !

Izma trembled as she stood there on the inside of the half-open door, and her heart beat with such pain.

ful throbs that she wondered if it was truly breaking.

"How white Lord Dancourt was !" she thought, as she continued to gaze at him, "and how still ! He did not seem to breathe at all. Death could not be more quiet than this."

A sudden fear seized her heart.

She approached the lounge, and bent over his still form ; she looked at him closely and saw, to her relief, that he was breathing gently. She touched his forehead with her hand, and it was damp and cold, for the fire in the grate had long ago burned low, leaving the room uncomfortable and chilly.

He stirred and muttered her own name, and she drew back startled, fearing that he would awake and find her there ; but after a moment, he again grew still.

"Poor Archie !" she murmured, with sudden compassion, her bosom heaving and fresh tears starting to her eyes. "My husband !" she whispered, as if the words were sweet to her ; and with a strange brilliancy in her dark eyes, she fell on her knees beside him, hesitated, flushed, drew back, with a sort of gasp, and then quickly, desperately she pressed her lips lightly to his. The act seemed to recall her to her senses ; and frightened at her own temerity, she sprang to her feet, and, without a backward glance, hurried from the room.

Not a moment too soon, however ; for Lord Dancourt stirred again, and this time opened his eyes, looking around him with a startled glance. The touch of Izma's lips to his own had aroused him, yet he knew not whether it was a dream or a reality.

"Izma !" he called, passing his hand across his forehead in a dazed manner, but there was no answer.

He looked around the room. How real the dream had been, he thought. The very air seemed freighted with her presence, and he could almost feel the pressure of her nectarine lips upon his own. He rose to his feet, a delicious thrill passing over him at the blissful remembrance ; he could scarcely satisfy himself that it had not been true.

He saw that the door was open, and he knew he had not left it so the evening before.

He started. What if she had been here—the fair young wife whom he so madly loved.

The room was surely filled with a faint, sweet perfume that reminded him of her.

He went to the door and looked out, but no one was there ; he turned back, laughing at his madness. It had been a dream—only a taste of the bliss which he was never to know, he thought, the old pain returning to his tortured heart. Izma would never come to him like that—never. Did she not despise him ? Oh, the folly of that brief, sweet hope !

He shivered—for the room was cold—and walking over to the window looked out, thinking of the words that Izma had said to him :

“ Another day will not find me at Merivale.”

Would she keep her word and go away ?

How he longed for her to stay ! yet he could not ask her to remain at Merivale, now that he had given her her freedom.

As he stood there looking out upon the sunrise, a carriage rolling towards the south gates and leaving Merivale suddenly came into his sight. He gave a cry of surprise, and, throwing up the window-sash, leaned out and strained his eyes to see who was the

occupant. At a glance, he saw it to be a woman ; and as the vehicle turned the bend in the drive and her profile was exposed to view, he reeled back, with a hoarse groan, crying despairingly :

“Izma ! my love, my life ! She is *gone* !”

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LADY MAUD'S WEDDING-EVE.

It was somewhat of a surprise to the Countess and Lady Maud when they learned that Izma had left Merivale forever. Perhaps a pang of remorse shot through their hearts when the following day her luggage was taken from the house and carried to Lane Park, and the man that came for it informed them that his mistress would leave for her old home in Spain on the morrow. It was enough to melt their hearts toward Izma to see Lord Dancourt's despair. He was no more like the same happy, light-hearted Archie than if he had been some other man. His loud laughter was no longer heard, his boisterous ways, of which Lady Southwolde had so often disapproved, was replaced by a quiet demeanor which plainly betokened the sorrow in his heart. He seldom spoke to any one ; and it was several days after Izma had left Merivale, before either the Countess or Lady Maud had the courage to question him. What they learned was through the Earl, and he himself hardly gave them satisfaction.

But one day when Lady Maud chanced in the library where Lord Dancourt sat, she said to him :

"Archie, why did your wife leave Merivale?"

He turned and gave her such a withering look that she quailed before it.

"Lady Maud, why were you not civil to her when she was here?" he asked.

"Because I did not want her here," she answered truthfully.

"Then I trust you are satisfied," he retorted angrily.

"She will never trouble you again."

"How could I like her when she has ruined my life?" asked Lady Maud, with sudden pain. "If it had not been for her—"

"You would not be compelled to marry the Duke of Ellesmere," Archie finished. "I am not sorry for you. It is no more than you deserve."

"Archie!" she exclaimed in a wounded voice. And looking up, he saw that tears had sprung to her eyes.

He was silent for a moment then he said contritely :

"Forgive me if I speak too harshly ; but it can't be helped, you know. Somebody must pay the debt on Southwolde, and I don't know how it is to be done unless you marry the Duke of Ellesmere."

"But Izma—your wife—will she demand it now?" asked Lady Maud, in astonishment.

"No ; but I prefer that she should have it," replied Archie in a hopeless tone. "You must keep your promise to the Duke, Maud. It is the only way. You must marry him before Christmas."

"I will," she said firmly; although she paled at the thought. "You need not fear that I will break my promise. I could not—the time is too near at hand."

She spoke truly. The time for her marriage with

the Duke of Ellesmere was indeed quickly approaching. The day was now only six weeks hence, and Lady Maud knew that they would soon pass by. She shuddered to think of the sacrifice; yet she had made up her mind to meet it bravely. In the course of time, she must marry some one; and as her heart would never throb with love again, it might as well be the Duke of Ellesmere. What did it matter? She felt that but few people cared for her.

The Countess had spared neither pains nor expense in ordering her *trousseau*. The wedding was to take place at Merivale, as Lady Maud had positively refused to be married in town; but Lady Southwolde was determined to make a grand affair of it, even though the ceremony was not to be performed in Hanover Square.

The Countess was left to manage everything; Lady Maud would not even be consulted. She did not care whether her *trousseau* was plain or beautiful; she only begged that there would be as little display as possible. If she had been left to suit herself in this, there would not have been a single guest invited; but the Countess proceeded to have her own way, and in the mean time the Duke came weekly to Merivale, each visit disgusting his bride-elect more and more.

As the time drew nearer Lady Maud's heart grew faint, and she felt that she must cry out in her pain, and throwing herself on her knees before the Duke of Ellesmere beg him to release her from her promise. How quickly the days flew past. She almost counted the hours of each one of them. She wondered what her life would be when she was alone with the man who was to be her husband, for as soon as they were

married it had been arranged that they should go to his duchy, as she had declined to take a bridal tour.

The Countess, though pleased and flattered at the match her daughter was to make, and gratified at the many congratulations that she received from her friends, was not so happy as she had thought to be, as she saw plainly enough that Lady Maud was miserable. Archie's trouble, too, bore upon her mind. It had been impossible to keep his marriage a secret, and it was not strange that people began to remark the absence of Lady Dancourt from Merivale. Friends of the Countess who came to see the bride were surprised that she had gone to Spain alone "to pay a last visit to her old home." They thought it odd indeed that her husband had not accompanied her.

It was but a short time, however, before they began to see that there was a mystery, and the Countess was saved the embarrassment of an explanation. But she was not entirely indifferent to her son's sorrow. Sometimes a feeling of bitterness toward the Earl would swell her heart, and she would say to herself that it was he who had brought the blight upon their children's lives. If it had not been for his rashness and folly Archie would never have met Izma Alvarez, and Maud would perhaps have been happily married to Lord Charleroy. Yet try though she would, she could not regret that Lady Maud was to be Duchess of Ellesmere.

It was a relief to her that Izma had gone away, although it had made of Lord Dancourt a changed and unhappy man. She believed, as she had of Lady Maud in the beginning, that he would get over it in

time. She could not realize that the true love of a true heart never dies.

Lord Charleroy's name was never spoken at Merivale, and no mention of Floradene ever being reopened was made. Occasionally a letter came from Castle Lorna written by Valerie or Lady Thoresby, but there was never a line of Lord Charleroy. Several letters from Castle Lorna had come for Izma, but after a while they ceased, as there was never any answer. Not knowing where to send them, Lord Dancourt took possession of them, and with an aching heart laid them away in the room that she had occupied.

Merivale had never seemed so cheerless as now. Everything appeared changed, for the family circle had broken up. Lady Maud was always in her own room, and Lord Dancourt was seldom to be found. Even the Earl could not find time to sit with his wife and talk to her for hours, before retiring at night, as he had of old.

The Countess missed it greatly, and often, when alone, she would think how happy the days had been before trouble came to them, and how confiding had been the love of her husband and children, and she would ask herself, with a twinge of conscience :

"Am I in any way to blame for this? Have I helped to destroy the happiness that once existed at Merivale?"

Then she would cry in her fulness of heart :

"Oh, my children, I love you! It was all for your own good!"

But even if she repented, things had gone too far now to recall them, she thought; and reasoning thus,

she doubled her efforts for the preparations of Lady Maud's wedding.

The days grew colder and colder. Winter had at last outrivalled autumn, and the bare limbs of the trees and the eaves of Merivale were thick with long glittering icicles.

It was but one week before Lady Maud's wedding-day when her trousseau arrived; and though it was a perfect marvel of beauty, she turned from it with a shudder. She looked out upon the bleak, icy scene around her, and thought that the world, frozen as it was, was no colder than her heart.

Only a few more days—how short they seemed!—and her freedom would be taken from her; she would be the Duke of Ellesmere's wife. She had wept until tears refused to flow; she had moaned and cried aloud in her anguish until her voice had failed her, and at last, a calm, such as only despair can know, had settled over her.

Her wedding eve was soon at hand, and the earth, as if in honor of the morrow, had donned its bridal-robe. Sleet and ice had given place to snow, and all day great white flakes fell noiselessly and covered every open spot, filling the basins of fountains and banking itself up against the images that dotted the grounds here and there until Merivale appeared like some great, ghostly grave-yard.

Lady Maud did not leave her room all day; she scarcely moved from her seat by the window, where she watched the fast-falling snow-flakes as they fluttered like down to the earth below.

To-morrow at noon all would be over, and she almost wished that the ordeal was past.

The Countess came to her room once during the day, and kissed her pale cheek, saying, with real tears in her eyes, that it was hard to give her up even to the Duke. Lady Maud replied that it was dreadful; and seeing that she was better left alone, the Countess went away, thinking that each day she saw more of life's trouble.

When night came on, it was just as Lady Maud had anticipated—she was restless and wide awake, as she had been for a week past. Sleep was a thing impossible.

She did not leave the window until it was near midnight. All was quiet within and without, and the snow-flakes were still falling when she rose to her feet, and with a prolonged sigh made her way across the room. She was tired of the monotony at last, and opening the door, she stepped out into the hall and, went down the stairway. The lights were turned low, for the members of the household had each retired to their several apartments.

The library door was open, and Lady Maud entered and threw herself into a seat near the fire. She knew not why she had left her room and come here; she was only miserable, and longed to quiet the nervous restlessness that, since her betrothal with the Duke of Ellesmere, had almost bereft her of her reason. She turned her weary eyes toward the window and looked out, for the curtains had not been drawn: but there was nothing here to bring her rest. The snow-flakes were falling so thickly that she could not see beyond the edge of the balcony.

She arose and crossed the room to shut out the scene, but as she approached the window she sudden-

ly stopped, and gave vent to a cry of astonishment. The dark figure of a woman, half covered with snow, was in that moment outlined against the window on the outside, and as she pressed her pale face against the pane, where the light from the room fell upon it, Lady Maud saw, to her intense surprise, that it was Izma, Lady Dancourt.

CHAPTER XXXV.

“GOOD-NIGHT ; AND GOD BLESS YOU !”

LADY MAUD was not easily frightened, but the sight of Izma out there in the snow at this hour of night, when she had believed her far away in another land, was so unexpected to her that for a moment she could do nothing but stand there, startled and trembling, and stare at her through the window, undecided as to whether it was the living Lady Dancourt or merely an apparition.

A tap on the window-pane recalled her to her senses. She hurried forward, and threw open the sash, her heart beating excitedly.

“Izma—Lady Dancourt!” she gasped. “Great heaven! it is really you. Why are you here? and on such a night as this! Come in,” with a shiver of cold. “You must be half frozen.”

“It is *very* cold,” said Izma, in a benumbed voice, as she drew her long dark cloak closer about her, and crossed the threshold of the window. “I have been watching for you out there in the snow for the last hour.”

"For me?" exclaimed Lady Maud in astonishment, as she closed the window, and drew the curtains together, wheeling around and looking into Izma's pale face.

"Yes; be quiet. No one must know that I am here—" with an uneasy look around her. "I have something to say to you alone."

Lady Maud closed the door cautiously, and going up to Izma took her cloak from around her, saying:

"You are covered in snow, and are pale and trembling. Draw near the fire and warm yourself. How strange that you should come here to see *me* at midnight! I thought you were in Spain."

"I have never been there," replied Izma, sinking down into a chair near the fire with a sigh of relief, and placing her wet feet near the fender.

"But we heard that you were gone."

"That was my intention, but something seemed to hold me back until after your wedding-day."

"Until after my wedding-day! What do you mean? Why, to-morrow is my wedding-day!" cried Lady Maud.

"That is why I am here to-night," said Izma, glancing up into Lady Maud's perplexed face.

"Are you from Lane Park? We believed the place closed for ever."

"I have never left there, but I am from Floradene to-night."

Lady Maud looked at Izma incredulously, and dropping down into the nearest seat replied faintly: "I cannot understand you. I beg of you to explain."

Izma was silent for a moment, then she looked up and said: "You know, Lady Maud, that we have nev-

er been friends to each other, yet though I tried hard to steel my heart against you, I could not see you mar your own life when, by reaching forth my hand to stay you, I might prevent it. You may scorn my interference, but I am here to-night to do what I should consider a favor if any one should do the same for me."

"And what is that?" asked Lady Maud breathlessly.

"It is to save you from the marriage with a man whom you do not love—the Duke of Ellesmere."

"Lady Maud sprang to her feet, paling to the lips.

"You are mad!" she cried. "To-morrow is my wedding-day, and why do you presume to think that I do not love the Duke of Ellesmere?"

"I am quite sure you do not," replied Izma quietly, drawing a folded paper from her bosom as she spoke. "Here is the written proof of it, I think,—a leaf from your diary, penned by your own hand."

Lady Maud took it and read it through with astonished eyes.

"How came you with this?" she asked half angrily.

"I found it on the terrace beneath your window some time ago. I read it, and knew at once that it belonged to you, yet I did not mean to ever restore it to you until a few days ago. I could not tell why I kept it, but it must have been for this end. It is yours, is it not?"

"Yes," admitted Lady Maud huskily. "I tore it from my diary and intended to destroy it, but I forgot it and must have left it on my table near the window, where the wind blew it to the terrace below. What has this to do with your visit here to-night?"

“A great deal ; for if I had not discovered your secret I would not be here at all. There is a great mistake in the words that you have written on that leaf, Lady Maud. Lord Charleroy loves you.”

Lady Maud sank down into her chair again, breathing hoarsely.

“Why have you come here to taunt me ?” she asked reproachfully. “You have already had your revenge—we have suffered enough. May I not have peace on my wedding-eve ?”

“But I swear that I speak truthfully,” Izma earnestly declared. “Wait until you have heard me. When I left Merivale, I went away with the determination to let you suffer whatever you might ; my heart was so full of bitterness, that I did not care whether your marriage with the Duke of Ellesmere would bring you happiness or not. I knew that you did not love him ; I knew that your heart had been given to Lord Charleroy ; and I had stayed with him long enough at Castle Lorna to learn that he loved you ; yet my first decision was to go away and leave you to your fate. My conscience smote me. I lingered at Lane Park for days, striving to harden myself against the good impulse that rose within me, but in vain. I even confided all to Nurse Llorenta ; but she derided my weakness, saying, with all the angry vehemence of her hot southern blood, that it should be ‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth ;’ but still I was not satisfied. No one will ever know how hard I have tried to keep my oath of vengeance, yet my whole nature has rebelled against it.”

Here her voice grew husky, and Lady Maud’s face softened.

"I may have wronged my dead father and my dead mother," she continued, "but thank heaven when I have left you to-night, Lady Maud, I will know that I have not wronged God. Listen! A few days ago I made up my mind, and I sat down and wrote to Castle Lorna. I knew Lord Charleroy was still there, and I bade him to come at once to Floradene, as a matter of importance required his presence here. He answered immediately by wire, saying, 'I will come;' but he did not reach Floradene until to-night. I was there ahead of him, with Nurse Llorenta, for I knew if he came at all it would be to-night. I met him and told him my reasons for bringing him here. To-morrow was your wedding-day, and if he did not wish to see your happiness ruined he must save you from the Duke of Ellesmere.

"He was amazed and startled. He declared that such a thing was utterly impossible. You loved the Duke, for the Countess had told him with her own lips before he went to Castle Lorna that there was no hope for him—the Duke of Ellesmere was your choice."

"Oh, 'it was false!'" cried Lady Maud excitedly, trembling from head to foot.

"So I believed," continued Izma, "and I proved it to him by placing before his eyes the very diary leaf which you hold in your hand, telling him at the same time how I came in possession of it.

"It was sufficient to convince him of the truth, and the look of joy that flashed into his eyes was enough to prove to me, even if I had not known, that he still loved you."

"Why have you not told me this before?" he cried.

‘To-morrow is her wedding-day. How can we prevent the marriage now? Oh, it is too late, and it will kill me if I lose her now, knowing that she loves me!’

“My carriage is without,” I told him. “I will go to Lady Maud this very night; I will tell her the truth, and she must decide upon some course of action. We can do nothing until we have consulted her, but I feel sure that when she knows all she will withdraw from her marriage with the Duke, even at the eleventh hour.

“I was true to my word. I came straight here from Floradene, determined to see you, in spite of the lateness of the hour, for I knew there was no time to lose. The light through the library windows drew me towards the spot, yet if I had not seen you here I should in some way have effected my entrance into the house. Now that you know all, Lady Maud, what do you mean to do? You must decide upon something quickly, for I am to take your message back to Lord Charleroy to-night.”

Lady Maud was as pale as death. She attempted to rise to her feet, but fell back panting.

“O Izma, help me!” she cried piteously. “I cannot even think; my brain is whirling.”

“Do you love Lord Charleroy well enough to give up all for his sake?” asked Izma.

“Yes, yes, and a thousand times more,” was the passionate reply; “but how can I jilt the Duke of Ellesmere at the very altar, when he was to save Southwolde from ruin? It is dishonorable; I cannot stoop to it. No, no, it is too late!”

“It is less honorable, Lady Maud, to marry the

Duke when your whole heart is given to another," said Izma. "Go to him and tell him the truth, and he will release you."

"But he will not return to Merivale again until he comes to be married. How can I tell him then?"

"You must, even if the ceremony is delayed. It is your only chance. Say nothing to any one until he arrives, and then ask that you may see him alone. I feel sure that he will give you your freedom when he learns that you have no love for him."

"I cannot believe it," said Lady Maud, huskily. "He will say that it is too late."

"But it is *not* too late until the marriage vows have been spoken. You ask me to help you, Lady Maud, and this is my advice: Marry the man you love, at any hazard. You need not fear for Southwolde"—with a sudden sadness and pain in her voice—"I will never trouble it. My revenge has all turned to bitterness; it has recoiled upon my own head. This night it dies forever, and I bury it with the past."

Lady Maud arose, and, going over to where Izma sat, fell upon her knees before her.

"See," she said in a tone of entreaty, "I kneel before you to ask your forgiveness. I have wronged you; but it was because I did not know you. How good you were to come to me to-night. I was cold and cruel to you. I wonder that you do not hate me."

"No—do not kneel to me," said Izma, with an expression of pain. "I have been very base. I am not worthy."

"But you forgive me?"

"Yes; you were but little to blame. Come! it is

growing very late. I must be away. Tell me what is your decision for to-morrow."

Lady Maud rose to her feet again and covered her face with both hands.

"I know not what to do," she replied unhappily.

Izma was silent for a few moments, then she looked up suddenly and said :

"Why not have an interview with Lord Charleroy to-morrow?"

For an instant Lady Maud's face brightened, then her countenance fell.

"If I should see him and speak to him, my courage would fail me," she said.

"But do you mean to marry the Duke of Ellesmere if he refuses to release you?"

"What else can I do?"

"Then I will carry this message to Lord Charleroy," said Izma, rising. "I can do no more. I have told you the truth, and left you to your own decision." She picked up her cloak and threw it around her ; but before she had taken a step toward the window through which she had entered, Lady Maud sprang forward and caught her by the arm.

"Do not go," she pleaded. "Wait ! Great heaven ! I cannot give Elwood up now. Yes"—hoarsely—"tell him to come to me to-morrow. I must see him, even if it be for the last time."

"And tell him that you still love him?"

"Yes."

"And where will you see him?"

"In father's study, as I can reach it by a rear stairway. No one will be there to-morrow, and he can enter by the window that opens upon the little balcony.

I will see that it is left unlocked. Tell him that I will see him to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock."

"But do you not go to the chapel at twelve?" asked Izma.

"Yes, but Lord Charleroy must be here when I speak with the Duke. He must help me; I cannot bear it alone."

"Very well; I shall return to Floradene now with your message," said Izma, moving toward the window. "I wish you nothing but happiness, Lady Maud; always remember that."

Lady Maud followed her to the window and threw it open.

"Will you never return to Merivale, Izma?" she asked. "I think we could learn to love each other now as—as sisters ought."

Izma's face grew paler; a strange sadness swept over her countenance.

"I shall never return here," she replied, with a catch in her low voice.

Lady Maud took her hand and carried it to her lips.

"It is very sad," she said, "that husband and wife should be parted. Izma, if you could only learn to care for poor Archie—"

"There! I must go," broke in Izma, huskily, an unseen tear splashing down her cheek.

"It is too cold to stand here. Close the window, Lady Maud—good night."

"One moment, Izma. Hear me! Come back to-morrow, and do not go away. We will atone. Archie is so unhappy. He loves you—"

"No, no! You are mistaken," replied Izma, hurry-

ing toward the steps. "What you ask can never be. Good night."

"Good night ; and God bless you !" returned Lady Maud, with a sigh ; and standing there in the open window, she watched her as she battled her way through the snow-storm until she disappeared from sight.

"God bless her !" she repeated fervently, as she closed the window and turned away. "I will carry to my grave the memory of the words she spoke to-night. 'Lord Charleroy loves you.' Heaven be praised for that !"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A TRAGIC DEATH.

THE hours that Lord Charleroy waited for Izma's return from Merivale were hours of suspense. He had gone to the window of the sitting-room, where he sat with Nurse Llorenta, whom Izma had left there when she went away, for the twelfth time, when the sound of horses' hoofs in the snow caused his heart to leap to his throat with joy. She had returned at last.

He hurried to the door and, opening, it went down the steps to meet her, too eager to wait until she had entered the house.

"Do you bring me good news ?" he asked quickly, as soon as he gained sight of her.

"Yes," she replied ; and as he led her into the warm sitting-room she told him the result of her meeting with Lady Maud.

In his gratitude he grasped her hands and held them tightly.

"How am I ever to thank you for this?" he cried.

"I ask no thanks," she replied. "I have only done my duty, Lord Charleroy. I will feel that I have gained my reward if it all ends happily."

"You are a noble woman, Lady Dancourt," he said. "Heaven itself will some day reward you."

Izma smiled sadly.

"No, Lord Charleroy, in your gratitude you overestimate my worth. I am far from noble."

At this moment Nurse Llorenta arose and spoke to Izma in her native tongue.

"Yes, indeed, it is after midnight," replied Izma. "My lord, Nurse is sleepy"—with a faint smile; "we must leave you, now, and return to Lane Park. We can do more for you to-night."

"To Lane Park!" exclaimed Lord Charelroy in surprise. "Why do you not go to Merivale, Lady Dancourt?"

A crimson flush arose to Izma's face.

"I—I thought you knew, Lord Charleroy," she stammered. "I—I—you know I have left Merivale. We will go to Spain to-morrow."

"What! to-morrow? You and your husband?"

"No. I will go with Nurse Llorenta."

She moved toward the door and Lord Charleroy, with a look of astonishment in his eyes, followed.

"Lady Dancourt," he said, "you know me to be your friend. Tell me—has your life gone wrong, and so soon as this?"

"Yes, all wrong," she replied, with a sudden gush

of tears, as she turned and gave him her hand in parting.

He took it and carried it to his lips. He would have questioned her further, perhaps, but she looked at him so beseechingly that he opened the door and allowed her to go from him in silence.

"Just as I thought in the beginning," he said as he closed the door and turned back into the room. "The marriage was not a happy one."

But in his own joy of heart Izma was soon forgotten. He could think of nothing but Lady Maud and the morrow. True, she was still the bethrothed wife of the Duke of Ellesmere, and he might refuse to release her; but the thought of her love for him alone was in itself enough to cause his pulses to thrill madly. And she had told him to come; he would see her and, looking into her eyes, would know that her heart throbbed with love for him. Even for this, he would not have lived in vain.

Yet the night was full of suspense for him.

The risk of winning Lady Maud at this late hour, when she was on the eve of marrying the Duke of Ellesmere, was so great that he was sure of nothing. Failure was even more certain than success.

When morning dawned the snow-storm was over; the earth was still white, but the clouds had broken and grown light, allowing the sun to peep forth now and then from behind them.

It seemed to Lord Charleroy that the time for him to go to Merivale would never come. By ten o'clock his impatience had reached a fever heat, and springing on his horse, which had been saddled for his use a half hour ago, he rode swiftly away from Floradene,

regardless of the flying snow, which the horse's hoofs sent in his face and every direction.

As he passed the Southwolde chapel, where the ceremony was to take place, he saw that its doors were thrown open, and he shuddered and spurred his horse onward, praying in his heart that the woman he loved should be his.

His blood coursed like fire through his veins as he neared Merivale ; every nerve in his body quivered with emotion as he thought that a few moments more and he would stand face to face with Lady Maud. How long it seemed since they had parted. He could hardly realize that he was going to her again.

It was yet too early for the guests to have begun to arrive, and Lord Charleroy could ride near the house and enter without fear of being seen.

His heart beat wildly as he dismounted his horse and made his way toward the balcony upon which the windows of the Earl's study opened.

He hurried up the steps and looked into the room. Lady Maud was not there, but he tried the end window and found it unlocked, and he knew that she was expecting him.

He entered the room and threw himself into the nearest seat with panting breath, listening attentively for the approach of a light footstep.

He had not long to wait, yet to him each moment seemed an hour ; just as the clock in a room somewhere near by was striking eleven, there was a step, a soft rustle of silken garments, and, springing to his feet and wheeling around with a low cry, Lord Charleroy beheld a picture that he never forgot in life.

It was Lady Maud in her bridal robe.

She had stopped on the threshold of the rear door, through which she had entered, and stood there, half-hesitating, half-doubtful, as beautiful as a dream, yet as pale as the dead white silk she wore. Her veil was thrown back, and for a moment Lord Charleroy could only stand there speechless and drink in her loveliness.

He saw her fair face light up as he looked at her, saw her eyes fill with happy tears, and then he sprang towards her and held out his arms, exclaiming:

“Maud ! my darling !”

That was all ; but another moment and her head was on his bosom, and she was weeping in his arms. Her strength had indeed failed her. It was impossible to resist the love that had so long filled her heart.

For that blissful, thrilling moment she even forgot the Duke of Ellesmere.

* * * * *

Lady Maud had begged to be arrayed in her bridal-dress early, and then be left alone until the Duke of Ellesmere arrived, for she knew this was her only chance of seeing Lord Charleroy ; and the Countess, who was willing now to gratify her smallest wish, readily consented. Already Lady Maud had bidden her maid to send the Duke to her father's study as soon as he reached Merivale ; and when her mother had left her, she felt safe from interruption for at least an hour. At eleven o'clock she was alone, and it was an easy matter to steal down the rear stairway.

Lady Southwolde, all unconscious of any evil, had repaired to her own apartments and made an elaborate toilet ; and at precisely quarter of twelve she swept down stairs, resplendent in violet velvet and diamonds,

to receive the attendants which were to accompany the bridal twain to the chapel.

The bridegroom had not yet arrived. He was expected each moment, as the train from London, which was to bring him hither with a party from that place, was due at half past ten. He was late, but no one thought much of this but the Countess, who, when twelve o'clock had come, began to grow nervous. She knew that the chapel was already filled with eager, expectant guests.

It angered her to think that the Duke of Ellesmere would keep his bride waiting. What did it mean? At two o'clock they were to leave Merivale for his duchy. The train would surely not wait for them. The Countess laughed and talked hysterically, yet her heart grew cold within her as the moments flew past. No one seemed to note the passing time ; yet pale with dread for something,—she knew not what,—Lady Southwolde hurried from one window to the other, looking out for some sign of the Duke of Ellesmere.

Why did he not come? It was not like him to be late.

The Countess could not tell why she was so fearful.

As the hands of the clock began to move away from twelve, she almost went mad with suspense. Was she to lose all at the hour when success had seemed so certain? She felt that an hour of such suspense would kill her.

Twelve o'clock—fifteen minutes after, and then the door of the drawing-room was flung open and the Earl of Southwolde, ghastly pale and trembling, entered with what appeared to be an open telegram in his hand.

A sudden hush fell upon the room, and Lady Southwolde sprang towards him, with an inarticulate cry.

"Robert!" she exclaimed, clutching his arm convulsively. "Something has happened!"

"My God! Yes!" he replied, passing his hand across his eyes. "The London train has been wrecked, and—and—" His voice wavered and broke down, and a cry of horror from every lip in the room followed his words.

"The Duke," gasped the Countess, in a voice of terror. What of *him*, Robert?"

The Earl shuddered and glanced at the message in his hand.

"This telegram from the scene of the wreck," he said huskily, "apprises me of his—his *death*. There will be no wedding at Merivale to-day."

A wild cry from the Countess drowned his last words; and reeling away from him, she fell half-fainting into the nearest chair.

For a moment there was a silence as solemn as death in the room, and then they began to whisper in awed voices: "The bride! poor Lady Maud! it will kill her!"

Lady Southwolde, hearing their words, roused herself and sprang to her feet, her face pitifully drawn white.

"Let me go," she said hoarsely, making her way towards the door. "I will break the news to her." And before any one could have interposed, she had staggered out into the hall and was hurrying up the stairway.

"God forgive me! it is my punishment!" she cried

under her breath, a sob shaking her body from head to foot. "Oh, it is awful! How am I to tell her?"

When she reached Lady Maud's apartments she was amazed to find them empty. If it had not been for the door through which Lady Maud had gone out, and which now, for the first time since the Countess could remember, stood open, she would immediately have alarmed the house; but as she stepped out into the corridor in search of the missing one, and went toward the stairway, the sound of voices floated up to her ears.

Trembling in every limb, she hastened down the steps. The sound of the voices led her straight to the Earl's study, and as she paused in the rear doorway, the sight she saw within caused her to stand there for several moments speechless and horrified.

Lady Maud with a long, dark cloak thrown over her bridal robe was in the act of being led through the open window by Lord Charleroy, whose arm was thrown protectingly around her, and they were looking into each others faces with their eyes aglow with love.

"Come, my darling," he was saying in a caressing voice. "You shall never regret it—my own bride, by the right of our love. No one can take you from me now." And bending his head he kissed her passionately.

With a swift bound Lady Southwolde reached their side, and sprang between them, causing Lady Maud to fall back with a startled cry.

"What does this mean?" she demanded, turning to Lord Charleroy, who faced her fearlessly.

"It means, my lady, that I have learned the truth

at last, and have come to claim my promised wife," he replied steadily. "She has consented to go with me, and I set the whole world at defiance. No one can take her from me."

The Countess turned her glance toward Lady Maud.

"*This* on your wedding-day?" she cried. "Would you have disgraced us all? Maud, you are mad!"

Lady Maud crept nearer Lord Charleroy, and he clasped her hands in his own.

"I will marry the man I love," she retorted, proudly; "yet I refused to go with him, mother, without freeing myself from the Duke of Ellesmere, until I learned how cruelly you had parted us. How could you have done it, when I trusted you?"

Lady Southwolde's eyes dropped before her daughter's reproachful gaze.

"It was for your sake," she replied.

"No, no, mother, not for my sake, for you came near blighting my life," said Lady Maud bitterly.

The Countess looked up desperately.

"It was for Southwolde, too," she added, piteous tears springing to her eyes.

"But Southwolde is no longer in danger, mother, and I cannot marry the Duke. I must go with Elwood."

The Countess started violently. The surprise with which she had met had caused her to forget the terrible errand that had brought her here.

She placed a detaining hand on Lady Maud's arm.

"You need not fear," she said in a shuddering voice. "The Duke of Ellesmere is out of your way forever. Read this and understand me." As she spoke she placed the fatal telegram in her hand.

Lady Maud's face blanched as she read it, and with

a hoarse cry she placed her hand over her heart and reeled backwards, crying :

“ It cannot be true ! ”

“ It is ; you are free. The Duke of Ellesmere is dead,” said the Countess.

“ Dead ! ” exclaimed Lord Charleroy incredulously. “ Lady Southwolde, what do you mean ? ”

The Countess took the telegram from Lady Maud’s trembling hand and placed it in his own. He read it, and it fluttered from his fingers and fell to the floor. His face paled, and he bowed his head reverently while Lady Maud, who had sunk down into a chair, wept tears of sorrow and regret.

It was several moments before any of them spoke again.

At length the Countess said slowly :

“ You see there is no need to flee from Merivale.”

Lady Maud looked up with tear-wet eyes.

“ I—I am sorry he is dead,” she sobbed remorsefully. “ I—I am sorry for all the hard things I have said against him, but I could not have married him, Elwood,”—looking at him pleadingly—“ did I wrong him very much ? ”

Lord Charleroy went up to her and knelt beside her, pressing her hands fondly.

“ Not half so much as we have been wronged,” he replied with a glance at Lady Southwolde, who shrank away from his gaze. “ You were mine. No one had the right to part us, and the Duke of Ellesmere was only stealing you from the man who loved you.”

“ And yet it was such a horrible death,” said Lady Maud shuddering. “ Oh, was there ever such a wedding-day as this ! ”

The Countess stepped up to her and placed her hand on her arm. None of the palor had left her face.

"I think you had best come to your room," she said unsteadily. "No one must know of this occurrence. Lord Charleroy, will you be kind enough to depart from Merivale unseen? It will save a deal of talk which will otherwise occur if it is known that Lady Maud spent the morning with you here on her wedding-day."

"I will go at Maud's command," he said, rising to his feet and bowing before her.

"You *must* go," declared Lady Southwolde quickly. "It is no time for you to even speak of your love for Maud."

Lady Maud looked up with an expression of pain.

"Yes, go, Elwood," she said. "You have my promise, and I will be true to it. God grant that our wedding-day may be a brighter one than this!"

He bent over her, and dropped a kiss on her forehead, replying :

"It will be a day of sunshine, my darling, because our love will take away the shadows."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A YEAR AND A HALF LATER.

A BEAUTIFUL villa in Spain—as fair a scene as the summer sun ever shone upon. A building of spotless white, gravel walks bordered by orange trees, numerous fountains and flower-beds, and a smooth, velvety

terrace sloping down to the banks of a clear river, where gayly-painted skiffs and small sail-boats rock idly with the balmy breeze.

A woman, whose face is turned from us, has suddenly emerged from the trees to the left of the river bank, and wanders leisurely toward the edge of the water. Her graceful form is perfect, and her dress of clinging white lace with a broad scarlet sash knotted carelessly about her girlish waist, is flawless. Her raven locks fall loosely from under the brim of the large white hat, adorned with scarlet poppies, that shades her face from the sun, and looking at her even with her back turned one would imagine her unusually beautiful.

She stops and looks across the river. There is something pathetic in the droop of her head. She turns her face slowly this way. How familiar is the clearly cut profile! Now her dreamy dark eyes are full upon us. We know her instantly, although a year and a half has increased the sadness of her fair face.

It is Izma.

She is at home here, for it is the villa where Renzo Alvarez had lived and died; it is the place where she had spent her sunny childhood; yet, as she looks around her, there is an expression of loneliness and melancholy in her eyes which bespeaks of unhappiness and unrest.

A sigh escapes her lips, a tear falls from her eye, but with an impatient movement she brushes it away, and wanders on until she reaches a rustic seat on the terrace, where she throws herself, and buries her face in her hands.

A year and a half since she left Lane Park, and

never once had she heard from Merivale. She had been true to her word in leaving England. On the day that Lady Maud was to have married the Duke of Ellesmere she had gone away ; yet often since then her mind had gone back to that snowy night, and she wondered if it all had ended happily.

It had hardly been a year and a half of happiness to her, for it had been full of tears and heartache. She could not forget the past ; it lived with her night and day, and seared her conscience with remorse.

Visions of the man whom she had wedded in the little chapel in Scotland haunted her, yet his memory was far from hateful to her. The days that she had spent with him became very dear to her thoughts, and often when she would think of him as she had last seen him in the library at Merivale, lying so pale and helpless before her, and murmuring her own name in his sleep, she would burst into passionate tears.

Too late her stubborn heart acknowledged the truth. She loved the man whose enemy she had tried in vain to be. Day after day she had fought against it, but even Nurse Llorenta, who had been faithful to her through it all, was shrewd enough to see why her former interest in life was all gone.

"You grieve for your husband," she often said to her when she found her weeping bitterly. "You can never again be happy here."

And at last Izma began to realize the truth of her words. She could never again be happy here, away from the man who, in spite of all, was her husband.

A year and a half away from him, and the pain of the separation was greater now than the day she had parted from him.

Sitting there on the terrace with her face buried in her hands, her thoughts travel back to former days, and she looks up and cries aloud, in a voice of pain :

“ Archie, my love—my husband, where are you to-day? Oh, if you would only come to me, and see how miserable my life is without you! But you will never come—never, never, for you told me to go away! You did not love me.” And again she buries her face in her hands, and bitter sobs shake her slender frame, while the birds in the trees overhead twitter and fly away, as if frightened by her sorrow.

The moments go past as she sits there; she knows not how long she had been away from the house when suddenly a footstep behind her startles her, and springing to her feet and looking around she sees Nurse Llorenta hurrying towards her with a pale, excited face.

She springs to meet her, crying :

“ What has happened, nurse? You are very pale.”

The woman stops, and taking breath, replies :

“ My lady, there has been an accident at our very gates. A man was thrown from his horse and wounded, and the servants have brought him into the house unconscious. Come quickly! You must see him. His face puzzles me. Somewhere I have seen it before.”

Unhesitatingly Izma follows her, and together they hurry towardst he house. Izma's heart beats quickly; for she has a dread that the man may be dead before they reach him.

“ This way,” says Nurse Llorenta, as she opens the front doors and, passing into the spacious hall, crosses

over to the third door to the left. "He was too ill to carry up the stairway ; so they brought him in here."

As she speaks, she turns the knob noiselessly, and Izma follows her into the room.

The wounded man is lying on the white bed, and his face is turned from them.

"Go near him," whispers Nurse Llorenta, "and look into his face. He is unconscious ; he will not see or know you."

Izma obeys, and on tip-toe she approached the couch. She bends over him and looks down into his pale, handsome face, and a wild cry that echoes through the whole house, breaks from her lips.

"Great God !" she gasps hoarsely. "Nurse ! O heaven—nurse, look at him ! It is he—it is Archie—my husband—my —" Her voice breaks and dies away, and she sinks to the floor in a dead faint ; for the shock has been too much for her.

She is picked up and carried to her room ; and soon she is brought back to life and to the joyful recollection that it was indeed Lord Dancourt, her husband, who she had seen in the room below.

She could not fully realize it, or believe that her own eyes had not deceived her, until she had stole back into the room and looked into his face again. It was he—there was no doubt of it ; and with a sob of joy, she fell on her knees by his bedside and kissed his pale, unconscious face again and again.

For days he lingered between life and death, and Izma never left his side. Even in his wildest moments, when his fevered brain seemed on fire, he would grow quiet and murmur her name fondly if she placed her gentle hand on his brow. She could no

longer doubt that he loved her ; for her name was ever upon his lips, and he would beg her in such a piteous manner not to blame him that tears would rise to her eyes. He seemed to know that she was near him, yet he could not understand.

She would press his hand and say, "It is I—Izma, Archie ; don't you know me, dear ?"

He would look at her with that wild light in his eyes and reply, "Izma—Izma ; she is my wife. I would know her anywhere." And then he would ramble on feverishly and seem to forget her.

They were trying days for Izma ; for she felt that if Lord Dancourt died now, she would want to be buried with him. She could never live to endure the reproach of his wild, fevered words.

Day and night she prayed by his bedside for heaven to spare him, promising that her whole life should be spent in atonement for her sins.

God is just—he seldom gives us more than we can bear—and at last the physician who attended Lord Dancourt declared that he would live.

It seemed to Izma, in her gladness of heart, that the sun had never shone so brightly as on that day. Archie would live. The very birds seemed to sing it from the tree-tops.

She went to his room and threw open the windows to admit the June sunlight, saying to herself that there should be no darkness here. She knelt beside him and, holding his hand tightly, thanked God for what He had done.

It was a fair picture for Lord Dancourt to open his eyes upon. The cool, exquisite bed-chamber, filled with the perfume of flowers and dazzling sunbeams,

the glimpse of orange-trees and beautiful surroundings through the open windows, and there beside him, on her knees, holding his hand in a loving clasp, Izma, his own wife.

He thought he had suddenly awakened in heaven, or was in the midst of some blissful dream.

A thrill of delight passed over him ; he dreaded to speak, lest the vision should fade away.

Suddenly Izma looked up and saw his eyes, with the light of reason in their depths, fixed upon her, and a low cry escaped her lips.

“ Archie ! do you know me at last ? ” she asked, with a quick breath of suspense and ecstasy.

“ Izma ! ” he cried. “ Oh, can it be true ? ”

“ That you are here with your wife, who loves you ? Yes ”—her burning face dropping to the pillow—“ it is true. ”

He looked at her for a moment incredulously, dazed by this sudden joy.

“ Where am I ? ” he asked, believing each moment that he would awaken.

“ In Spain, at my home, ” replied Izma, looking up into face. “ You were thrown from your horse at the gates here, and have been very ill. Are you not glad ”—with a little quiver to her voice—“ that you are here with—with me ? ”

A happy light sprang to his eyes ; he reached out and covered both her trembling hands with his own.

“ Darling—I seem to be dreaming, ” he replied in a low, passionate voice. “ For days past I have thought in a vague sort of manner that an angel was at my bedside, and—tell me again, Izma, was it you ? Am

"I mad? or did you say you loved me—my wife, my own true wife?"

"I love you, Archie," she repeated. And he closed his eyes and was silent for a moment, as if striving to realize the blessed truth.

At length he looked up again and drew her closer to him.

"Kiss me," he whispered; "I have dreamed it so often—kiss me, my love, and I will know that you are mine."

She drew back blushing, and then with a low laugh she bent nearer and their lips met in a lingering caress. He drew her dark head down beside him and held it there, smoothing back the curly tresses that fell across her brow.

"Now tell me all," he said. "Oh, Izma, you do not know how miserable I have been without you! Why did you go away? You knew I wanted you. My life was a blank without you."

"I was at war with my own heart," she replied. "I did not know until I left you how well I loved you. The time has seemed very long," sighing. "I did not believe you would ever come to me."

"If I had only known, how quickly I would have come, my darling, but I believed that you despised me. I have suffered very much."

"And I."

"My poor Izma! God forbid that I will ever again cause you a pang!"

"But what brought you here, Archie? Were you, indeed, in search of me?"

"Yes, but I had scarcely dared hope for the blessing of your love. It was my father's dying wish that

I should find you and give you your rightful position as Countess of Southwolde."

"Your father's *dying* wish!" exclaimed Izma, starting up in astonishment. "Oh, Archie, is the Earl dead?"

"For six months past," he replied in a choked voice; "and his last wish was that I should right the wrong that he had neglected, and do justice to Lady Adelene's child. I left Merivale as soon as possible and came for you, yet never dreaming that I should find both a Countess and a wife. I was thrown from my horse, which I had rode from the city, at the very gates of the villa,—I remember now,—and even as I fell I thought of you and wondered if you would find me there; but an instant later my head struck a stone and I knew no more."

"And if it had not been for the Earl's dying wish would you never have come to me?" asked Izma wistfully.

"I don't know. I think it was all the work of heaven, Izma," he replied. "How can we tell what would have happened? I knew that my heart bled for you day after day. I was growing to despise life."

Of her own accord she bent down again and kissed him.

"I wronged you, but I will be so good to you in the future, Archie, that you will forget the past."

"I have forgotten it already," he replied with a happy smile.

"But tell me about Lady Maud and Valerie and Lady Thoresby," said Izma. "I have often longed to know if it all ended happily with Lady Maud."

"She is as happy as we will be shortly, my dear. She was married to Lord Charleroy six months after the Duke of Ellesmere's death."

"The Duke of Ellesmere dead, too?" cried Izma.

"Yes," replied Archie, proceeding to tell her all that had happened.

"I did not learn until a month later, Izma, how you had come to Merivale at midnight in the snow to help Maud in her trouble. I thought you had left Lane Park long before. Maud loves you, and would sacrifice anything for your happiness. How glad she will be when we return to Merivale together; and mother, too, will bless you, for she has changed very much since father died."

"I am so glad that all is well," said Izma happily.

"Yes, Maud's wedding was the gladdest one I ever saw. Father and mother both gave her willingly to Lord Charleroy, for they saw how true had been their hearts, and that their lives could not be happily spent apart. There is no home in England more full of content than Floradene."

"And Valerie—what of her?"

"She has been the wife of Captain Brunell for a year past. By the death of his uncle he came into a considerable inheritance, and they are comfortably and happily established in life. I left them at Floradene when I came away, where they have been visiting for several weeks. I was the only one among them whose life was marred by discontent, but now—ah, Izma, my own, I am the happiest of them all. We will return to Merivale never more to live apart. It is a great triumph, a heavenly blessing."

"Yes, yes; and Valerie shall have Lane Park and we can see each other every day, just as we used to do," said Izma delightedly. "Oh, Archie, I could weep for joy!"

"I could better laugh for joy, my fair Countess of Southwolde," replied Archie, smiling at her childish enthusiasm.

"Then let us laugh, dear," she said; and looking into each other's eyes, they gave way to a burst of merriment for sheer gladness of heart.

CONCLUSION.

NEVER had there been a happier home-coming than that of the young Earl of Southwolde and his beautiful wife. It was a day never to be forgotten. It seemed to Izma that Merivale had grown larger and grander; it no longer looked hateful to her sight, for even the servants were waiting there with glad faces to greet her, and cheered and raised their hats as she passed.

Valerie, who was at Merivale to greet her, screamed with delight when she saw her, and was the very first to clasp her in her arms; then came Lady Southwolde, who kissed her kindly and welcomed her with warmest words, saying, with a faint moisture in her eyes, that she hoped she would forget the past and be happy at Merivale, and that she was glad to resign her place to the woman her son loved. Izma threw her arms around her neck and replied, "I will try to be a good daughter, mother;" and that was the beginning of a life-long friendship. From that day they loved each other with a true affection, which made of Merivale a home of peace and happiness.

Lord and Lady Charleroy, Lady Thoresby and Captain Brunell were all there to welcome her, and Izma could hardly tell whose face was the gladdest, they were all so full of tenderness and love.

They were truly pleased to have her at Merivale. In her wildest dreams she had never thought of such happiness as her return to England brought her. Each day beside her

husband strengthened her love for him, and he was so foolishly fond of her, that people talked of his affection far and wide. He could not bear her out of his sight; he even persuaded her to spend half of the day with him in his study whenever it was necessary for him to be there. He did not care what came or went so that she was near him.

But it was just as his father had said—Archie made a good Earl of Southwolde. He was greatly beloved, and by the poor and suffering as well as the rich he was honored. It was not long before his fair, young wife, too, was loved and blessed by many. Merivale was changed, but it was for the better—no one refused to acknowledge that. Much that had been left undone during the old Earl's lifetime was now accomplished by his son.

A new era had begun for Southwolde. Never before had it so prospered, and Lord Southwolde declared that it was all on account of his wife.

Izma had been at Merivale but a short while before she gave Lane Park to Valerie, on condition that she and her husband would live there part of their time. Mrs. Brunell, however, needed but little coaxing, for she was glad enough to be near Izma, whom she loved more than ever since her return. Nothing could have been more pleasant than the unity that existed between Lane Park, Merivale, and Floradene. In all England there were not three homes more full of love and happiness.

Izma felt that heaven had been too kind to her when one day her husband took her by the hand and led her into the picture gallery at Merivale, where a beautiful portrait of Lady Adelene, her mother, had been lately finished and placed on the wall by the side of her honored ancestors.

The smile upon the fair face seemed to increase as Izma looked at it, and with a burst of tears she turned and threw herself upon Lord Southwolde's breast, weeping out her happiness.

"Archie—dear, *dear* Archie," she sobbed, "how can I ever atone and thank you for this?"

"You have done so already, my darling," he replied, kissing away her tears. "Tell me, Izma, if a single sorrow has been left in your life, and I shall be content."

"Not one, my husband," she declared, "and the light is all the brighter because I once saw it through a cloud."

"Then," he said with a happy laugh, "let us be thankful for both the sunshine and the shadows."

THE END.

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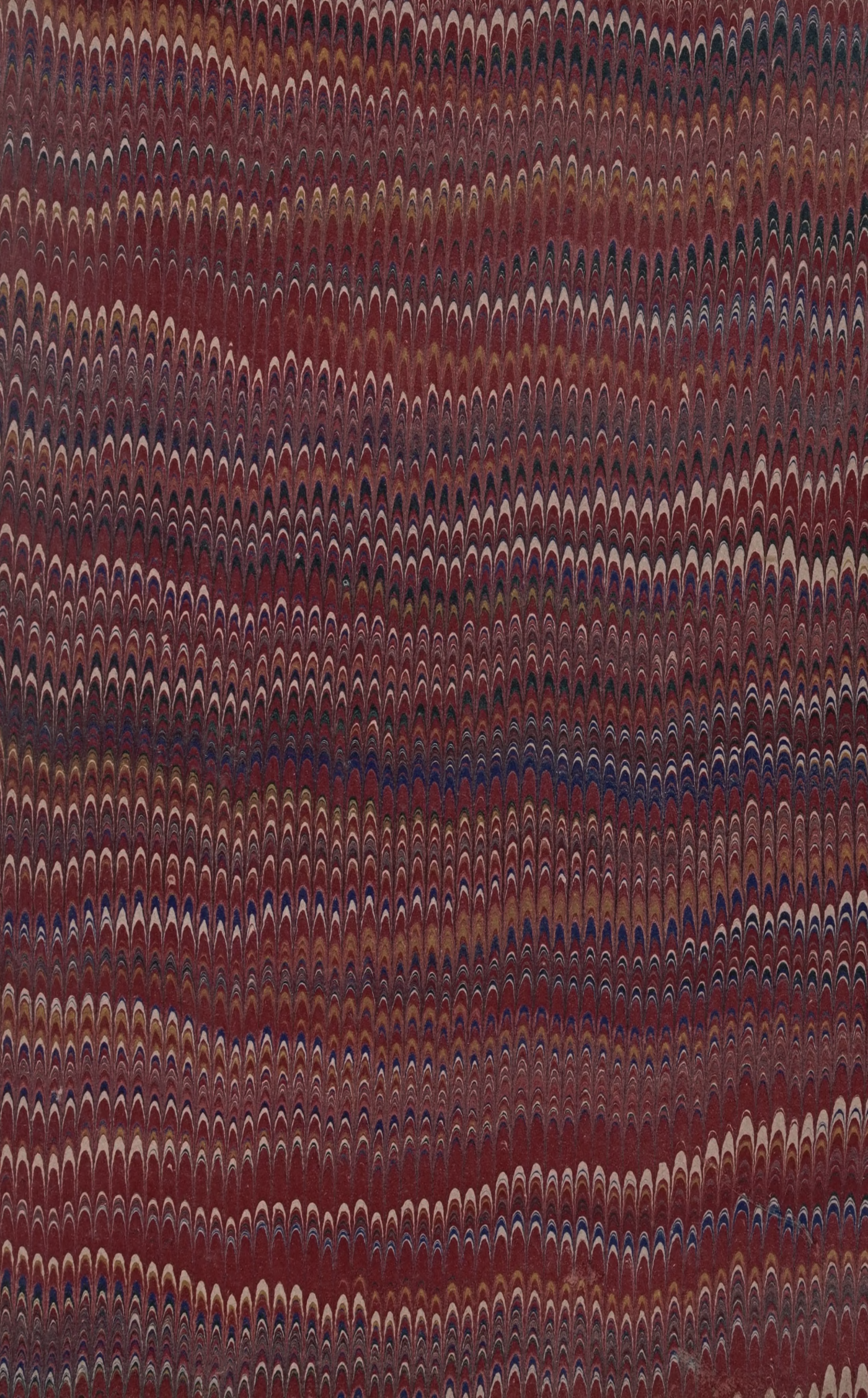
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